

# US airstrikes kill scores of civilians in Afghanistan

**Bill Van Auken****6 May 2009**

On the eve of a tripartite summit in Washington which the Obama administration has organized with the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan, reports from Afghanistan indicate that US air strikes in western Farah province have killed and wounded scores of civilians, many of them women and children.

Villagers from the remote Bala Baluk district near the Iranian border put the death toll as high as 150, according to local government officials.

According to accounts from the region, US forces battling insurgents who had moved into the area called in air strikes. A bomb struck mud-brick houses in the village of Gerani, where civilians had taken refuge from the fighting.

A provincial council member in Farah province, Abdul Basir Khan, told the Associated Press that villagers had brought truckloads of mangled corpses of bombing victims to the provincial capital to prove that women and children had been slaughtered in the US attack. The official said that villagers had gathered in front of the local government office, crying and shouting.

"It was difficult to count [the bodies] because they were in very bad shape," said Khan, adding, "Some had no legs." Villagers told him that 150 people had been killed, he said.

"These houses that were full of children and women and elders were bombed by planes," Mohammad Mieem Qadherdan, a former top regional official who had witnessed the carnage, told the media. "It is very difficult to say how many were killed because nobody can count the number. People are digging through rubble with shovels and hands."

The spokesman for the US occupation forces in Afghanistan, Col. Greg Julian, acknowledged that US forces had fought a battle in the area and reported that wounded Afghans had sought medical treatment at a military base in Farah. "We offer our condolences to those affected by today's operations and will immediately investigate the claims to determine what happened," he said in a pro forma statement.

Qadherdan said that the death toll was "worse than

Azizabad," referring to a US air strike last year that killed at least 90 Afghan civilians, two-thirds of them children, in the western province of Herat. He estimated the death toll in this latest air strike at "more than 100" and said that ten houses had been destroyed.

In the Azizabad incident, US warplanes targeted a large crowd that had gathered near a local airfield to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> day since the death of a local leader. The US military initially claimed that all those killed had been participating in a meeting of Taliban militants. Reports and photographic evidence from the scene, however, exposed this claim as a lie. The civilian death toll was confirmed by the Afghan government, the United Nations and human rights groups.

In the wake of the mass killing in Azizabad, Afghan President Hamid Karzai attempted to assuage popular anger in Afghanistan and deflect it from his own puppet regime by denouncing the killings and demanding that the American military stop targeting civilians.

For its part, the Pentagon vowed to exercise greater care. General David McKiernan, senior US commander in Afghanistan, issued a directive to US forces last September calling for American forces to be more discriminatory in the use of firepower.

At the same time, however, the US commander blamed the insurgents for the killings carried out by the US military, claiming that they purposely "mixed in with the population." This is the same charge leveled by every army engaged in a colonial occupation and counterinsurgency warfare to justify mass killings. The reality is that the insurgents are drawn from the population, living among and drawing support from it.

The directive did nothing to halt the bloodletting. According to a report issued by the United Nations in February, the number of civilians killed in Afghanistan rose 40 percent to a record 2,118 last year. Many of the dead were victims of US air strikes, which are regularly called in by American ground units that find themselves outmaneuvered by Afghan fighters, who enjoy the advantage

of battling in their own land.

Karzai, speaking before the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington on Tuesday, made a general reference to civilian casualties, but said nothing about the latest bombing. He counseled that the success of the US intervention in Afghanistan depended upon “making sure absolutely that Afghans don’t suffer—that Afghan civilians are protected.”

“This war against terrorism will succeed only if we fight it from a higher platform of morality,” he said in his speech. “We must be conducting this war as better human beings.”

Such appeals for “morality” serve merely as a cover for what is universally acknowledged among Western military circles to be preparations for a major escalation of the killing in Afghanistan. The Pentagon is in the midst deploying another 21,000 troops to the occupied country as part of a “surge” ordered by the Obama administration that will more than double the number of US troops to 68,000.

As British Brigadier David Hook, the deputy commander of the NATO-led force in the south of Afghanistan, told the Reuters news agency last week, “It’s going to be a bloody summer,” as the US forces begin combat operations in the region.

Hook also predicted a spike in casualties for the US-led occupation forces. A total of 1,140 US and other NATO troops have been killed in Afghanistan since the beginning of the war in October 2001. Nearly 400 fatalities have been recorded since the beginning of last year, as resistance to the occupation and armed attacks on foreign troops have risen sharply.

While escalating the US intervention in Afghanistan, the Obama administration is also exerting growing pressure on the government of Pakistan to suppress Islamist insurgents in its North West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

This is apparently going to be the main thrust of the meetings between Obama, Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, which begin tomorrow.

On the eve of these meetings, Richard Holbrooke, the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, indicated that Washington would demand an escalation of the military operations being conducted by the Pakistani army in the border region.

“We need to put the most heavy possible pressure on our friends in Pakistan to join us in the fight against the Taliban and its allies,” Holbrooke told the House Foreign Affairs Committee Tuesday. “We cannot succeed in Afghanistan without Pakistan’s support and involvement.”

The Pakistani military has launched a new offensive in the northwestern Swat Valley, calling on the residents to flee the area before the fighting erupts. In February, Islamabad essentially ceded the valley to the Taliban and agreed to the

imposition of Islamic sharia law as part of a peace deal that Washington condemned as capitulation to the Islamists.

The move by the Taliban to take over Buner, a district just 60 miles from Islamabad, triggered a response from the army, acting under pressure from Washington. The Pakistani military used helicopter gunships, jet fighters and commando units in an attempt to drive the armed Islamists out of the area.

Government officials estimate the renewed confrontation in the Swat Valley could drive another half a million Pakistanis from their homes into already crowded and under-equipped refugee camps.

The Taliban, however, is reportedly continuing resistance in Buner and has established firm control over the Swat region. Previous attempts by the Pakistani military to wrest control of the area from the insurgents ended in failure, giving rise to the peace agreement.

A bill submitted to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Monday calls for tripling US aid to Pakistan to \$1.5 billion annually for the next five years. The legislation, titled the “Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009,” conditions the aid on the Pakistani military taking concerted action to prevent “terrorist groups” from operating inside the country and specifically to prevent the Taliban from finding safe haven on Pakistani soil for operations inside Afghanistan.

The escalation launched by the Obama administration is aimed at salvaging the imperialist project initiated under Bush: the assertion of American hegemony in the strategic region of Central Asia. Its effect is the further destabilization of the entire region, creating the conditions for even greater military catastrophes.



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