

Massacre of civilians overshadows “AfPak” summit

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A summit meeting in Washington between President Barack Obama and his Afghan and Pakistani counterparts, Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari, has been overshadowed by the worst massacre of Afghan civilians since the US invaded the country in October 2001.

The tripartite summit was called by the Obama administration as part of its escalation of the US war in Afghanistan and its increasing extension across the border into Pakistan. It was meant to present an image of a common front between Washington and the “sovereign governments” of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as Obama described the Afghan and Pakistani regimes.

But the airstrikes carried out by the US military against remote villages in Afghanistan’s western Farah province have provided a grim warning of what the US escalation will mean for the peoples of the region.

The bombing raid went on for several hours on Monday night and into Tuesday following a battle between Taliban guerrillas and US-backed Afghan government troops. Airstrikes were reportedly ordered after the US-backed forces were surrounded by hundreds of insurgents.

The targets that were hit, however, were residential compounds in two villages in the Bala Baluk district. Villagers reported that they had sent women, children and elderly men there to protect them from the fighting, but that the houses were demolished in the US bombing, killing those inside.

According to estimates made by local Afghan officials in the area, the number of dead ranges from 120 to 200, the majority of them women and children.

Farah’s provincial police chief, Abdul Ghafar Watander, reported that the airstrikes destroyed 17 houses and killed 120 people. The toll was believed to be higher, however, as bodies are still buried in the rubble.

A village elder from the village of Gangabad, Hajji Issa Khan, said that at least 127 people had been killed. He said he was certain of the number because his tractor had been used to ferry the bodies to a central site where they could be mourned and buried.

Meanwhile, a member of Farah’s provincial council, Abdul Basir Khan, reported that he had collected the names of 55 people who had been killed in one location and 92 at another, putting the death toll at 147.

The *New York Times* reported Thursday: “In a phone call played on a loudspeaker on Wednesday to outraged members of the Afghan Parliament, the governor of Farah Province, Rohul Amin, said that as many as 130 civilians had been killed, according to a legislator, Mohammad Naim Farahi. Afghan lawmakers immediately called for an agreement regulating foreign military operations in the country.”

“The governor said that the villagers have brought two tractor trailers full of pieces of human bodies to his office to prove the casualties that had occurred,” Mr. Farahi said. “Everyone at the governor’s office was crying, watching that shocking scene.”

Anger over the mass killing erupted in the streets of the provincial capital of Farah Thursday, where a crowd estimated at 2,000 chanting

“death to America” and “death to the invaders” stoned government offices and battled police. The security forces fired on the demonstrators, wounding at least three.

Haji Nangyalai, 42, told the AFP news agency that the demonstration was called to “show our anger at the crimes committed by the American forces.”

“We ask the Afghan government to force the American forces to leave Afghanistan,” he added. “They kill more civilians than Taliban.”

According to the *New York Times*, three senior officials met with the demonstrators and offered to resign as a show of support for their demand that US troops withdraw from Afghanistan.

This latest atrocity could not have come at a worse time for the Obama administration, which is deploying another 21,000 troops in the country over the next few months, with the total US occupation force set to double to more than 68,000 by 2010.

The civilian casualties inflicted by US and allied NATO forces have consistently provoked popular outrage against the foreign occupation and increased support for the insurgency.

Last year, the number of civilian deaths from the fighting increased by 40 percent to a record 2,118.

US airstrikes, which killed 552 civilians last year, have continued to escalate. According to figures released by the US Air Force, a record number of American bombs were dropped on Afghanistan last month, the fourth straight month in which airstrikes have increased.

While the Air Force reported 438 bombs dropped on the Afghan population in April, this is only fraction of the airstrikes carried out by US warplanes. As the *Air Force Times* pointed out, the Air Force numbers “don’t include attacks by helicopters and special operation gunships. The numbers also don’t include strafing runs or launches of small missiles.”

“Sympathy” and lies from the Obama administration

In the face of this latest massacre, the Obama administration has characteristically talked out of both sides of its mouth.

Appearing with Karzai Wednesday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed her “personal regret” and “the sympathy of the administration on the loss of civilian life in Afghanistan.”

A State Department spokesman, however, stressed that Clinton’s words were meant as “a gesture, before all the facts of the incident are known.”

Obama issued a coldly indifferent statement following his meeting with Karzai and Zardari: “I...made it clear that the United States will work with our Afghan and international partners to make every effort to avoid civilian casualties as we help the Afghan government combat our common enemy.”

For his part, Karzai made vague remarks about the need to “reduce

civilian casualties in the struggle against terrorism.” Obama’s national security adviser, Jim Jones, told reporters afterwards, however, that the Afghan president, whose puppet regime is utterly dependent upon US military support, had made no request that the American airstrikes be suspended or even cut back.

Faced with the mounting evidence of a US massacre in Afghanistan, the Pentagon launched a “big lie” campaign aimed at shifting responsibility for the massacre from the US airstrikes to a supposed Taliban grenade attack designed to simulate the results of American bombing and thereby discredit the occupation.

This story was first floated Wednesday night with unnamed military sources telling reporters about the alleged grenade attacks.

The claim was then further spun by top Pentagon officials who acknowledged the existence of such reports—which they themselves invented—but refused to confirm or deny them.

Thus, the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, responding to questions about the airstrikes, said, “We have some other information that leads us to distinctly different conclusions about the cause of the civilian casualties.” He refused to elaborate.

A spokesman for the US Joint Chiefs of Staff similarly stated, “We cannot confirm the report that the Taliban executed these people.”

And Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who was in Afghanistan as part of the Pentagon’s preparation for the military escalation, responded to questions Thursday by stating, “The information that you cite about the Taliban throwing grenades into houses to create civilian casualties and put the blame on the United States is a report I have heard. But I think we will have to wait and see what results of the investigation are.”

Gates went on to insist on the moral superiority of the American military, whose killing of civilians he described as “accidental” as opposed to “deliberate” killing by the Taliban. He went on to charge that the insurgents “mingle with civilians” and use them as “human shields.” Similar claims have been made by every military power engaged in a dirty colonial-style war.

This shameless exercise in war propaganda is designed to deceive the American people and cover up a horrific war crime.

There is overwhelming and irrefutable evidence that the deaths were caused by a US bombardment, including the testimony of survivors as well as photographs and videos that have been taken at the scene, showing demolished houses and villagers picking pieces of US bombs from the rubble.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, the first international observers to visit the bombed villages, issued a categorical statement that the deaths had been caused by US warplanes. “We know that those killed included an Afghan Red Crescent volunteer and 13 members of his family, who had been sheltering from fighting in a house that was bombed in an airstrike,” said the ICRC’s chief official in Kabul, Reto Stocker.

The *New York Times* reported Thursday that villagers it had reached by phone reported that “many were killed by aerial bombing.”

The *Times* quotes a local farmer who said, “Six houses were bombed and destroyed completely, and people in the houses still remain in the rubble.” He described how “villagers, crazed with grief, were collecting mangled bodies in blankets and shawls and piling them on three tractors.”

Meanwhile, the Associated Press carried a report on the US-Afghan investigation team’s arrival Thursday at the scene of the mass killings. “Crying family members angrily showed investigators bombed-out buildings and lines of graves,” the news agency reported.

“They were pointing to graves and saying, ‘This is my son, this is my daughter,’ “ a local official reported.

The US military has a long record of issuing flat denials that it has carried out atrocities, despite evidence to the contrary. Once these mass killings are confirmed, it does its best to minimize the scale of the carnage.

This was the case in what before this week had been the bloodiest US action in Afghanistan, an August 2008 airstrike on the village of Azizabad in the western province of Herat. As news of the death toll leaked out, the Pentagon insisted that no civilians had been killed. In the face of mounting evidence, it acknowledged that five had died. After an investigation, Afghan and United Nations officials concluded that 90 Afghans, including 60 children, 15 women and 15 men, had been killed by fire from an American AC-130 gunship.

What is most noteworthy in the Pentagon’s attempt to foist the blame for the massacre in Farah province onto the Taliban is the way in which the American mass media has lent it credibility, despite the overwhelming evidence that it is a lie.

In general, this atrocity, which deserves to go down in history with crimes such as the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, has been treated with callousness and indifference.

No significant figure in either major party in the US has voiced any misgivings about the slaughter in Afghanistan. Within the ruling establishment, there exists a total consensus that this is America’s “good war,” in which crimes such as these are supposedly justified.

Obama himself is fully implicated in what is undeniably a war crime, and as tens of thousands of more US troops begin fighting in Afghanistan, there will be many more to come.

In his remarks following his meeting with Karzai and Zardari, Obama tacitly acknowledged this fact, warning that “there will be more violence,” and vowing that his government “will not waver.”

Having inherited the war in Afghanistan, Obama has ordered its escalation. He is pursuing the original predatory aims that led the Bush administration to launch the US invasion in 2001; that is, the attempt to assert US hegemony over Central Asia and its vast energy reserves. The inevitable result will be a steep increase in the loss of human life in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the threat of a wider war as the surge of US militarism destabilizes the entire region.



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