

After Afghan massacre, Washington says airstrikes will go on

Bill Van Auken
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In the final days of his trip to Washington, President Hamid Karzai demanded an end to US airstrikes in Afghanistan. In response, US National Security Adviser Gen. James Jones (ret.) insisted that the bombing of Afghan villages will continue, whether the country's supposed sovereign government likes it or not.

The juxtaposition of Karzai's and Jones' remarks speaks volumes about the nature of the US war in Afghanistan. It is a dirty, colonial-style intervention in which Washington dictates policy to a puppet government while unleashing military violence against an increasingly hostile population.

Karzai, who faces an election in August, is clearly responding to the popular outrage over last week's massacre in western Afghanistan, expressed in angry demonstrations across the country.

The reality is that his corrupt and unpopular regime would not last a day without the protection of the US military.

Asked on ABC news Sunday whether Washington would "comply" with Karzai's demand, Jones responded that "to tie the hands of our commanders and say we're not going to conduct airstrikes, it would be imprudent."

Pressed as to whether the Afghan president understood US policy, Jones continued: "I think he understands that we have to have the full complement of our offensive military power when we need it ... we can't fight with one hand tied behind our back."

The "full complement" of US offensive military power was unleashed last week against two villages in the Bala Baluk district of Afghanistan's western Farah province. According to testimony of villagers, as well as the findings of local officials and humanitarian agencies, the US bombing of these villages resulted in

the worst civilian death toll since the US invaded the country nearly eight years ago.

Villagers compiled the names of 147 civilians known to have died when American bombs were dropped on houses packed with terrified women, children and the elderly seeking shelter from a nearby battle between insurgents and US-backed Afghan government forces. Afterwards, outraged residents drove trailers filled with mangled corpses and body parts to the offices of the provincial government to prove the extent of the carnage.

The International Committee for the Red Cross, which visited the site of the bombing, confirmed the account of mass civilian casualties.

And on Monday, the British *Guardian* quoted an official with the United Nations mission in Kabul who called the reports from the scene "horrifying." The UN official, who spoke anonymously to the paper, said that bombing was carried out hours after the fighting between the insurgents and US-backed troops had ended.

"Local villagers went to the mosque to pray for peace," he said. "Shortly after evening prayers the air strikes were called in, and they continued for a couple of hours whilst the villagers were frantically calling the local governor to get him to call off the air strikes."

The US response to this massacre is as despicable as the crime itself. Employing its standard operating procedure in the face of such atrocities, the Pentagon rolled out a hodgepodge of lies and distortions. First, it denied that US forces were responsible for the slaughter, inventing a preposterous story that the Taliban had killed villagers with grenades to make it look like an airstrike.

In the face of incontrovertible evidence that houses had been razed to the ground by high explosives, the

US military launched its own “investigation,” concluding that it was impossible to tell how many of the victims were Taliban and how many were civilians, but that in any case the reported death toll was “exaggerated.” The Pentagon also claimed that responsibility for killing any civilians lay with the Taliban, who supposedly used the villagers as “human shields.”

The bombing of civilian homes by an occupying power, even if insurgents are in the vicinity, is forbidden by international law and constitutes a war crime.

Moreover, Afghanistan’s principal human rights organization is investigating reports that US forces used white phosphorous shells in attacking the village as well as in previous strikes against civilian targets.

These incendiary munitions can be used to create smokescreens or as flares. As an anti-personnel weapon, however, they inflict death and horrendous injuries, sticking to the skin and burning the flesh to the bone.

The use of such weapons against civilian targets constitutes a war crime.

The *Guardian* quoted Dr. Mohammad Aref Jalali, who heads a burn center in Herat, where victims were taken. “One of the women who came here told us that 22 members of her family were totally burned,” he said. “She said a bomb distributed white powder that caught fire and then set people's clothes alight.”

These war crimes have been carried out by the Obama administration, which is now sending another 21,000 US troops into the Afghanistan war and planning to more than double the size of the US occupation force to 68,000 by 2010. The additional troops will mean more and greater such crimes.

Significantly, on Sunday former Vice President Dick Cheney, appearing on CBS television’s “Face the Nation,” voiced his agreement with Obama over Afghanistan, while predicting that the US military would remain “committed there for a long period of time.”

“I was glad to see President Obama commit additional troops to Afghanistan,” said Cheney “I think we need to do whatever we have to do there to be able to prevail. Air strikes are an important part of it. And a lot of times, the air strikes do generate controversy.”

Despite the bitter partisan campaign that Cheney is

waging against the Democrats, he felt compelled to voice these words of solidarity—from one war criminal to another.

Behind Obama’s promises of “change” and appeals during the election campaign to popular antiwar sentiments, his administration is continuing and escalating the aggressive wars initiated under Bush for domination of the oil-rich and strategic regions of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

For its part, Congress is preparing to approve another \$96 billion supplemental appropriations bill that will fund these two wars through September. Meanwhile, the mass media largely parrots the line of the administration and has treated the recent atrocities in Afghanistan with studied indifference.

This consensus within the political establishment in support of the US war in Afghanistan stands in stark contrast to the hostility to war among masses of American working people. The Obama administration’s ongoing “surge” is the clearest demonstration that the struggle against war cannot be waged by the election of or pressure upon Democrats, but requires the independent mobilization of the working class against the capitalist profit system that gives rise to militarism.

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