

US air strikes kill Afghan civilians

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Attacks by US warplanes this week killed up to six Afghan civilians, including a four-year-old girl, and left another 16 wounded. The incidents in Afghanistan's southern Kandahar province have again underscored the grim human cost of the military escalation ordered by the Obama administration.

At least nine of the wounded reached the Kandahar City hospital. Photographs and television footage from the facility showed badly wounded women and children wrapped in bandages.

The Wednesday night attacks were prompted after a US foot patrol, apparently by special forces troops, drew fire from insurgents. The ground troops called for close air support, bringing in attack helicopters and other warplanes.

"I was at home last night when our house was bombed," a resident of the Kandahar village of Tawalla in the Shah Wali Kot district, one of two hit by air strikes, told Reuters television. Two of his family members—including the four-year-old girl, were killed, he said, while 12 others were wounded.

According to district officials cited by Reuters, at least two other civilians were killed and four wounded in helicopter attacks on the neighboring village of Miawand.

An account of the Tawalla attack given by the *New York Times* Friday said that the helicopters began firing into the family's compound at about 11 p.m. Thursday. Terrified, family members tried to escape the house, running to hide in a nearby orchard.

"When we reached the garden, the helicopter shot at us and injured three of my brothers, one sister, my mother, father and sister-in-law, and killed Rahmania, a four-year-old girl," Muhibulla, 24, a wounded survivor of the attack told the *Times*.

"I do not know the reason," he continued, "we did not hear any fighting that night, and there are not any Taliban in our village. It was a very frightening night for us—we could all have been killed."

The young man's father, Niammatullah, 46, said he had tried to stop the family from fleeing the house. Rushing after them, he saw the helicopters firing and crouched behind a wall that was hit and collapsed on him. After he managed to

get up, he found "seven members of his family lying wounded on the ground in the orchard, including four of his sons, his wife, his sister-in-law and his daughter," the *Times* reported.

In addition to the four-year-old child, the man named four neighboring farmers killed in the attack.

The US military followed standard operating procedure in refusing to confirm or deny the civilian casualties. "We are aware an event happened in Kandahar. We have forces down there and they were engaged but I don't know the specifics," Captain Elizabeth Mathias, a US military spokeswoman in Kabul, told the media. Such reticence is generally followed by attempts to minimize the number of civilian dead, while blaming the deaths on the insurgents.

As the *Times* acknowledged: "Over the past few years, NATO and United States operations have killed and wounded thousands of Afghans. This has contributed to growing opposition among Afghans to foreign forces in Afghanistan and to the government of President Hamid Karzai."

It is noteworthy that even the *Times*, which has supported the Afghan war and Obama's "surge," is forced to admit that US-led occupation forces are widely hated for the violence they have unleashed on the population of Afghanistan over the last eight years.

The attack comes barely two weeks after the newly installed senior US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, issued a directive to American forces demanding that unit commanders "scrutinize" and "limit" air strikes against Afghans' homes that inevitably result in civilian casualties.

The order came in response to the air strikes in western Farah province that massacred an estimated 140 civilians, resulting in mass riots and protests.

Yet the attack Wednesday evening follows by barely a week an earlier air strike in southeastern Ghazani province that killed eight civilians, including two women and two children.

It is clear that McChrystal's directive was for propaganda purposes and has had no more effect than a similar order issued to US forces by his ousted predecessor General David

McKiernan last September. The dependence of American forces on air strikes is a measure of their status as an occupying force operating amid a hostile population from which the insurgents are drawn.

Some proponents of the Afghan escalation that under Obama has brought another 21,000 US troops into the country argued that the solution to reducing air strikes was to have more “boots on the ground.” This is hardly the case, however, as the more troops that are introduced, the more violent clashes occur, leading to still more air strikes. Thus, the number of bombs dropped and the number of close air support sorties flown last month have broken all records, on track to double the numbers recorded last year.

The isolation of US forces within a hostile population has been further underscored by the unfolding operation involving 4,000 US Marines and British forces in Helmand province.

As the *Washington Post*'s “embedded” reporter Scott Tyson recounted, the Marines are running short of basic supplies because everything they need, including ammunition, food and water, has to be air-dropped from transport helicopters. Transporting materiel overland is impossible because of the threat of attack from the insurgents. As a result, Marines from one company whose uniforms were torn during a march into the area have been left to fight in their boxer shorts, Tyson reported. The effect on morale is evident. “No mail, no PX. People are starting to get ornery,” one officer told the *Post*.

The continuing difficulty in supplying occupation forces was illustrated again Friday with attacks on oil tankers bringing fuel supplies to US and NATO troops in Afghanistan. The attacks, carried out in northwest Pakistan's Khyber region, saw one truck erupt into flames after being struck by a bomb, and a second one severely damaged. Guerrillas supporting the Afghan insurgency regularly attack US-NATO supply convoys attempting to make it through the mountainous Khyber Pass.

Meanwhile, across the border in Pakistan the US drone war continues. On Friday, a missile fired from a US drone struck a village in North Waziristan, a tribal area, killing at least five people. This brings to 48 the number of drone attacks launched by the US since last September. According to figures recorded by the Pakistani government, approximately 470 Pakistanis have been killed in these attacks, the majority of them civilians.

In the latest attack, there was again no claim that the missile killed any senior Taliban or Al Qaeda figures. In the area that was struck, the leader of local Taliban forces is Hafiz Gul Bahadar, a direct descendent of Mirza Ali Khan, the legendary Pashtun leader who fought British colonial forces from the 1930s until Pakistan's formation in 1947.

The reactionary, colonial-style character of the US war in Afghanistan has been further exposed by an ongoing protest at the US prison at Kabul's Bagram Air Base. Some 600 prisoners have refused to leave their cells for two weeks to protest their arbitrary and indefinite imprisonment without charges or trials.

Among the prisoners are dozens of non-Afghans who were abducted from other countries and flown to Afghanistan under the CIA's “extraordinary rendition” program, which is designed to circumvent US constitutional and legal requirements that the detainees be formally charged. The Obama Justice Department has filed motions opposing granting these Bagram detainees even the limited judicial oversight allowed at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp in Cuba.

The Obama administration's escalation of the war in Afghanistan has only just begun. Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced Thursday that he is considering sending still more US troops into the war, while military commanders have made it clear that they want considerably more forces.

Obama's recent talk of working toward an “effective exit strategy” is merely aimed at deceiving the American people. Military experts agree that suppressing the insurgency in Afghanistan would take at least a decade, with many thousands more killed.

That Washington is prepared to embark on such a course is a measure of the desperate position of US imperialism, which is in Afghanistan not to fight “terrorism,” but to secure US hegemony in Central Asia, with its vast energy resources. The intensification of the fighting in Afghanistan and its extension across the border into Pakistan, however, will heighten instability throughout the region, sowing the seeds for a far greater conflagration.



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