New atrocity in Afghanistan

US airstrike incinerates scores of civilians

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An airstrike by US warplanes operating as part of the NATO occupation in northern Afghanistan killed more than 100 people early Friday morning, most of them civilians who were incinerated when two gasoline tankers, hit by bombs, exploded in flames.

Large numbers of severely wounded have been taken to the local hospital in trucks and carts.

The two tankers, hijacked by Taliban guerrillas, became stuck in the mud trying to cross the Kunduz River. The insurgents abandoned the tankers after opening the valves, and the local population of the village of Omar Kheil rushed from their homes to pour off gasoline into any containers they could find.

The British *Guardian* quoted Moeen Marastial, a member of parliament from Kunduz, as saying: "Local people are telling me 130 people have been killed despite all the promises of Nato to do fewer bombardments and reduce civilian casualties. There will be a reaction to this. It is a very bad day for international forces in Afghanistan."

Another local MP, Mohammed Amin Qaneh, said: "We are very upset; a lot of ordinary people have been killed. Why did they have to bomb the tankers? Does Nato put the price of oil higher than the price of blood? We want justice; we want those responsible punished."

Abdul Moman Omar Kheil, member of the Kunduz provincial council and a native of the village where the airstrike happened, explained the circumstances of the mass killing, telling the press that many local residents were awake at the time because of a late-night wedding party and celebrations marking Ramadan, the month-long period when practicing Muslims only eat and drink at night.

This account was confirmed by a Taliban spokesman who gave a statement to the Associated Press saying that guerrillas had captured the two tankers as they were being driven along a supply line from Tajikistan to the Afghan capital, Kabul.

While this scramble for precious fuel was underway, at about 2:30 a.m. local time, German military forces who patrol in Kunduz province as part of the NATO occupation called in an air attack, which was carried out by two US F-15 fighter-bombers. Each jet hit the tankers with a 500-pound bomb.

There were hellish scenes at the hospital in Kunduz, the provincial capital, about 15 miles north of the village. "Wounded people with extensive burns crowded a hospital in Kunduz," the French news agency AFP reported. "An AFP reporter said around eight were in terrible condition—the skin burnt black and peeling off to expose raw red muscle. Others were silent in agony with incinerated clothes stuck to their flesh."

An eyewitness, Mohammad Daud, 32, told AFP villagers rushed to one of the trucks when it got stuck in the river to take free fuel at the Taliban's invitation. "Everyone around the fuel tanker died," he said. "Nobody was in one piece. Hands, legs and body parts were scattered everywhere. Those who were away from the fuel tanker were badly burnt."

Reuters reported: "The desperately poor Afghan villagers heard that the Taliban had abandoned loaded fuel tankers by the river and thought it was their lucky day. Hundreds ran to fill jugs of the valuable stuff. Suddenly, a U.S. F-15 fighter jet roared over and opened fire. Mohammad Deen heard the explosion. When the flames died away by Friday morning, charred corpses were still strewn on the riverbank.

"Villagers could scarcely conceal their rage. 'It's a tragedy, and people are angry, very angry. The international community came here to help, but they are not helping anymore, they are only dropping bombs on us,' said Deen. Video footage filmed by Afghans at the scene the next morning showed piles of charred bodies lying by the river, beside chunks of twisted metal. The frame of one of the tanker trucks still smoldered."

NATO officials initially claimed all those killed were Taliban fighters. A German army spokeswoman told the media, "We are fairly certain that they were all insurgents, but we are not 100 percent sure." She added, "After assessing that only insurgents were in the area, the local

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ISAF commander ordered an airstrike which destroyed the fuel trucks and a large number of insurgents were killed and injured."

The puppet Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai echoed these claims, but the story subsequently underwent repeated adjustment as victims flooded the hospital in Kunduz and the scale of the catastrophe for the civilian population became undeniable.

The latest US-NATO atrocity gives the lie to the claims by the Obama administration and the Pentagon that the escalation of American military intervention in Afghanistan is aimed at defending the population from the resurgence of the Taliban, whose regime the Bush administration overthrew in 2001.

The day before the airstrike near Kunduz, Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Pentagon press conference that he had forwarded to President Obama a review of conditions in Afghanistan by the theater commander, General Stanley McChrystal.

Refusing to answer questions about how many additional troops McChrystal would seek, Mullen said, "What's more important than the number of troops he may or may not ask for is how he intends to use them. It should come as no surprise to anyone that he intends to use those forces under his command to protect the Afghan people."

After the atrocity at Omar Kheil, one could justly conclude that no worse fate can befall a people than to be singled out for such "protection" by American imperialism.

The location of the mass killing has military as well as political significance. Kunduz province is in the northern tier of Afghanistan, the region largely populated by minority Tajiks and Uzbeks, and long considered stable, at least by comparison with the Pashtun-populated regions of the south and east.

There have been a series of violent incidents in Kunduz, suggesting a growing ability by the Taliban or other anti-occupation forces to strike throughout the country. Former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami Afghanistan party, narrowly escaped assassination August 13, when his convoy was ambushed on the Kabul-Kunduz highway in Aliabad district. Rabbani was campaigning for the election of Karzai's strongest opponent in the August 20 presidential election, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah. Three weeks earlier, Karzai's running-mate, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, escaped a similar attack in the Khanabad district of Kunduz.

According to an August 31 report by McClatchy newspapers, the Taliban resurgence has become a strategic threat to the US-NATO occupation. McClatchy reported:

"Taliban insurgents have taken over parts of two northern provinces from which they were driven in 2001, threatening to disrupt NATO's new supply route from Central Asia and expand a war that has largely been confined to Afghanistan's southern half, US and Afghan officials said. Insurgents operating out of Baghlan district along the highway from Tajikistan launched coordinated attacks during the Aug. 20 presidential elections, killing the district police chief and a civilian, while losing a dozen of their own men, local officials said. It was the worst bloodshed reported in the country that day.

"Violence has been on the rise in recent months, however, as the Taliban and al-Qaida-linked foreign fighters have staged hit-and-run attacks, bombings and rocket strikes on German, Belgian and Hungarian forces in Baghlan and neighboring Kunduz provinces. The insurgents now control three Pashtun-dominated districts in Kunduz and Baghlan-i-Jadid, a foothold in a region that was long considered safe."

McClatchy quoted an unnamed "senior U.S. intelligence official" pointing out that the insurgents were targeting a recently developed logistics route that supplements the main route from the Pakistani port of Karachi and up through the Khyber Pass, which has been under increasing Taliban attack on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

The new route consists of roads from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan which merge and run south through the Hindu Kush mountains to Kabul and the main US airbase and supply center at Bagram. "The concern is if we don't stunt the (Taliban) growth, it could cause problems with our northern distribution network," the intelligence official told the news service.

The British newspaper *Guardian*, in its report on the Omar Kheil massacre, noted, "Today's reports talk about the Taliban, but Uzbek jihadists with close links to al-Qaida are said to be spreading into the area. Whoever they are, it is one more indicator that security is crumbling across Afghanistan."

This latest atrocity marks the worst massacre of Afghan civilians by US-led NATO forces since May, when airstrikes by US warplanes against villages in western Farah province claimed the lives of 140 people, according to an investigation by the Afghan government.

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