

Afghans shot down while protesting US occupation

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At least eight protesters were killed and 13 wounded in the southern Afghanistan town of Garmsir Wednesday, when security forces fired on a demonstration of several thousand people protesting against the US military. Protesters blamed the deaths on Afghan intelligence agents, backed up by US soldiers.

Demonstrators gathered in the central bazaar in response to reports that US soldiers had desecrated the Koran and abused Afghan women during a raid at a nearby village two nights before.

Protesters shouting “Death to America” and “Death to Kamal Khan,” the deputy police chief of Helmand Province, overturned cars, set fire to a school and attacked the local headquarters of the National Directorate of Security, the hated Afghan intelligence services, which works closely with US occupation forces. An intelligence officer and two policemen were reportedly killed in the clash.

Kamal Khan claimed NDS officers shot the protesters after the crowd began throwing rocks at them, and that no American forces were involved. US officials also denied that they had fired on protesters, although they said they had fired on and killed a “Taliban sniper,” who they claimed was firing on a nearby US base—Forward Operating Base Delhi, a few hundred yards away, during the protest.

Many demonstrators insisted that US troops had fired on them, along with the NDS agents. Haji Jan Gul, a demonstrator, told Al Jazeera, “people are very angry with the foreigners because they have desecrated our Holy Koran and also they fired on demonstrators. I repeat, many people were killed and wounded during the protest.”

The *New York Times* cited the comments of Jan Gul, a farmer whose son was killed in the protest. “The

Americans are blaspheming the holy Koran and violating and disrespecting our culture. We cannot tolerate such behavior. We will defend our religion.”

Local officials immediately blamed the Taliban, saying Mullah Mohammed Naim, the Taliban’s shadow governor for Garmsir, had incited the protest. “The Taliban were provoking the people,” Khan told the *Times*. “They were telling the people that the Americans and their Afghan partners are killing innocent people, bombing their homes and destroying their mosques and also blaspheming their religion and culture.”

The US military issued a formal denial of any wrongdoing during the raid, which took place in a nearby town last Sunday night, and said it would investigate any accusations about desecrating the Koran. Regardless, popular anger is erupting against the escalation of military violence in Helmand and throughout Afghanistan, as a result of Obama’s surge and the increased deaths from drone attacks and military raids.

Garmsir has been the focus of a counter-insurgency campaign in Helmand province since US Marines seized the town in May 2008 from the Taliban, which still controls the outlying areas. According to the *Times*, the majority of the 17,000 additional soldiers Obama sent to Afghanistan after taking office last January were sent to Helmand. Many were sent as part of the 30,000 more troops the president ordered last month. At least 363 American and other NATO service personnel have been killed there since the war began, more than in any other Afghan province.

On Tuesday, another 16 people were killed in a pair of Hellfire missile strikes launched by unmanned drones—one in Now Zad, the other in Nad Ali district. While attacks by unmanned aircraft in Pakistan have

been publicized, little has been said about similar CIA-directed attacks in Afghanistan, until this one. As usual, the US military claimed all of the dead were suspected insurgents.

A survey by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), released Wednesday, noted that the number of civilians killed in war-related violence in Afghanistan jumped 14 percent in 2009, reaching 2,412, the highest number since the 2001 US-led invasion began. Another 3,566 Afghan civilians were wounded, the report found.

The UN attributed the rise to the “intensification and spread of the armed conflict” and noted that US and NATO forces also saw their highest casualties with 520 troops killed last year, up from 295 in 2008.

The UN blamed the bulk of civilian deaths on Taliban attacks. US and NATO forces, the survey said, had caused 596 civilian deaths, while no fault could be attributed for the death of another 136 civilians because they died as a result of crossfire or by unexploded ordnance.

The civilian toll is no doubt an underestimation, particularly in regards to deaths caused by US and NATO forces. Nevertheless, the UN was forced to acknowledge that the civilian deaths caused by Western forces, predominantly in air attacks and “search and seizure operations,” often involved “excessive use of force, destruction to property and cultural insensitivity, particularly towards women.” The survey reported that 359 Afghans were killed in airstrikes alone in 2009.

An AFP report on the study noted that “Recent incidents, such as the deaths of 10 civilians including eight teenagers in eastern Kunar province in an authorized but non-military US operation, have seen Afghans take to the streets to protest against the presence of foreign troops.”

Two other US soldiers were killed, along with four Afghan soldiers, in separate explosions Wednesday in eastern Afghanistan, another area of continuing conflict. In addition, nine members of the Afghan National Police were injured Wednesday in other incidents.

NATO reported that the two American soldiers died in a bomb blast. Their deaths bring to 12 the number of US troops killed in the country since the beginning of the year. Another 16 from the international coalition have also been killed this month.

The Associated Press reported that four soldiers and a civilian died in an explosion in Khost, near the Pakistan border. In southern Afghanistan, three members of the national police force and three civilians were wounded when a suicide bomber in a truck detonated his explosives near a police office in the Daman district of Kandahar province, according to the Ministry of Interior.

In the face of growing opposition around the world and in the US itself, President Obama is seeking an additional \$33 billion for war spending— most of it to be used to pay for the troop escalation in Afghanistan, according to reports in the media. The new amount, which would raise war funding from \$128 billion in 2009 to about \$159 billion in 2010, will be sent to Congress on February 1.



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