

US airstrike kills Afghan civilians

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A US air strike killed dozens of civilians in Afghanistan's central Uruzgan Province Sunday, while to the south a US ground offensive in the Helmand Province town of Marjah ground through its second week, producing growing casualties and the threat of a humanitarian disaster.

The massacre took place near the border between Uruzgan and Daykundi provinces. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, special operations troops called in an air strike on three minibuses, which they reportedly believed were carrying armed insurgents.

Initial reports cited 33 people dead and at least 12 others wounded. Later, Afghan officials revised the death toll to 27. Among the dead were four women and a child. It appears to be the worst attack on Afghanistan's civilian population since September 4, when a German commander ordered an airstrike on a fuel tanker truck surrounded by local people, killing 142 of them.

The Afghanistan council of ministers criticized the air strike: "The repeated killings of civilians by NATO forces is unjustifiable," the council said in a muted statement.

Those whose family members were slaughtered in the attack had a different reaction. They demanded that the foreign troops get out of their country. "They came here to bring security but they kill our children, they kill our brothers and they kill our people," said Haji Ghullam Rasoul, whose cousins died in the attack. "We've had enough."

The US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, has stressed that civilian casualties undermine American efforts to pacify the country by inflaming popular opposition. He reportedly has changed the rules of engagement in Afghanistan to reduce such casualties, yet they continue.

A large share of these killings is the work of the Special Operation Forces, which McChrystal formerly commanded. These units are being used in an ongoing assassination program aimed at wiping out leading elements of the Taliban and other forces resisting the occupation. Last December, they were blamed for the execution-style killing of eight students, some as young as 11, in Kunar province.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates delivered a tacit defense of Sunday's mass killing, stressing that such atrocities had to be accepted as part of war.

"The thing to remember is that we're at war," Gates said at a Pentagon press conference. "General McChrystal is doing

everything humanly possible to avoid civilian casualties."

He continued, "I'm not defending it at all. I'm just saying that these kinds of things, in many respects, are inherent in a war. It's what makes war so ugly."

Appearing with Gates, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, sounded the same note. "War is bloody and uneven," Mullen said "It's messy and ugly and incredibly wasteful, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth the cost."

Gates also fell back on the increasingly widespread justification that those resisting the US-led occupation were using "civilians for cover." Such claims have been employed in every colonial-style war—in which foreign troops fight against members of an indigenous population—to justify the killing of unarmed men, women and children.

Significantly, both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* published articles Monday on the same basic theme, with the *Times* headline referring to "Afghans in the Crossfire" and the *Journal* to "Civilians in the Crosshairs."

The deadly air strike in Uruzgan largely overshadowed the Pentagon's continuous claims of progress and success in "Operation Moshtarak," the largest offensive launched by US-led occupation troops since the country was invaded more than eight years ago.

Afghan officials have reported 19 civilians killed in the operation, 12 of them slain in a rocket attack on a home that wiped out all of its occupants except one eight-year-old girl. Residents, however, have put the death toll significantly higher.

Aziz Ahmad Tassal and Mohammad Elyas Dayee, writing for International War and Peace Reporting, interviewed relatives of some of those killed in the wake of the rocket attack earlier this month.

One of them, Harun, was at a hospital in the provincial capital, where he had brought his two wounded brothers. One brother's wife had been killed by fire from a tank.

"My wounded brother Fazel Omar got married six months ago. When he was wounded, his wife came out of the house and ran towards her husband, but [they] shot at her from their tank and [killed] her," he said.

He continued, "That moment was very difficult for me because I could not go out of the house. I could not take my wounded brothers to the hospital and could not bring my dead

sister-in-law's body home.”

Also interviewed was Gula Jan, who had brought the bodies of his two young sisters to the Bost Hospital in Lashkar Gah. Their house had also been fired upon by the US-led forces. “My two little sisters were martyred by the foreigners’ rocket,” he said, “and I will not reconcile with the infidels until I can avenge my sisters.”

Ahmad’s father was shot dead by occupation troops when he left his home to get food. “The body of my father was left inside our home for two days because the foreigners did not let us out to bury the body in the cemetery,” he said. “We were scared of being killed. They are cruel and the infidels have no sympathy for us.”

Meanwhile, the *Wall Street Journal* reported growing anger among the population of Marjah over troops kicking in the doors of their homes, damaging the local market and killing their livestock.

There are growing concerns of a humanitarian disaster resulting from the operation, which US commanders say could continue for a month. Many residents who stayed behind have become imprisoned in their own homes by the fighting, running out of food and water and unable to seek medical care.

Many thousands more who fled are now homeless, with little assistance from either the occupation forces or the government of Hamid Karzai.

Reports from Marjah describe a hellish environment of constant firefights as the US and other foreign forces continue to meet resistance. Overhead, helicopter gunships, pilotless drones and fighter planes continuously circle the area, waiting for orders to attack.

At least 13 US and other foreign troops have been killed. Military officials claim that 120 “insurgents” have died in the fighting, but the count appears to be only an estimate and may well include civilians.

While the US military and the media have touted the operation—the first offensive since the “surge” ordered by President Barack Obama—as some kind of a turning point in the long war, it is increasingly obvious that it is nothing of the kind.

Some 11,000 troops backed by airpower have been poured into Marjah, a remote and largely rural district with barely 75,000 people. While the ability of the US-led forces to prevail over a few hundred Taliban fighters was largely taken for granted, their control over the area is far from secure as they continue to face frequent attacks.

The offensive was largely a demonstration of US power, with little strategic significance. But the strengths that it was supposed to showcase have proven illusory at best.

The claim that US forces will be able to be drawn down as the Afghan National Army takes over the fighting has been

refuted by the conduct of the Afghan troops, only one of whom has been reported killed. US Marines have been compelled to take the lead in every operation, with the Afghan forces showing little or no ability to act on their own.

Moreover, most of these troops are Tajiks, an ethnic group that formed the base of the Northern Alliance, with which the Taliban, with its base among the local Pashtuns, fought a protracted civil war. They are widely seen, like the American troops, as a hostile occupying force.

The US-led operation is also supposed to install a new district regime loyal to the US puppet government of Karzai and subservient to the foreign occupation. Chosen to carry out this job is one Haji Zahir, an Afghan émigré who returned to the country only recently after 15 years in Germany. He reportedly has few ties to the area.

Zahir was flown into Marjah for the first time Monday “aboard a Marine MV-22B Osprey helicopter with a contingent of Marine officers,” the *Washington Post* reported, adding, “He was on the ground for about two hours, not venturing more than 100 yards from where his aircraft landed.”

Also vying for leadership is the district’s former police chief, Abdul Rahman Jan. According to the *Post*, the police he led “were so corrupt and ruthless—their trademark was summary executions—that many residents welcomed the Taliban as a more humane alternative.”

The *Post* reported that Jan—who was sacked in 2005 at the demand of British officials—enjoys the backing of Karzai despite, or perhaps because of, his close ties to narcotics traffickers.

McChrystal said that the operation in Marjah was a “model for the future.” He suggested that the more important target would be Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second-largest city, with a population of nearly one million. Fighting for control there will prove far more costly in terms of casualties, both among civilians and US troops.

In an interview Sunday on the television news program “Meet the Press,” Gen. David Petraeus, head of the US Central Command, warned that casualties in coming months would be heavy and prove “tough” to bear.

Petraeus stressed that the offensive in Marjah was just “the initial operation of what will be a 12 to 18-month campaign.”

The general’s comment gives the lie to Obama’s claim that his escalation, with the deployment of 30,000 more US troops, would be reversed by July 2011, with the drawdown of US forces. His administration is waging a protracted, expanding and bloody war, with no end in sight.



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