

Another massacre of civilians in Afghanistan

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A special forces unit completing an early morning raid on Saturday gunned down seven men in the village of Rohani Baba, in Afghanistan's eastern Paktia province. Abdul Rahman Mangal, the deputy governor of Paktia, told CNN that the victims were road construction workers. A press release by the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) alleges that the men were employees of a private security company.

Details of the incident remain sketchy, but the ISAF statement claims that its troops had detained an alleged arms dealer and had moved on to "investigate suspected insurgent activity" at a housing compound in Rohani Baba. The seven men, some of whom were allegedly armed, were sitting in and around an SUV. After they were ordered in Pashtun to leave the compound, one man, carrying an AK-47, began to walk toward the occupation troops. He was shot dead. Some of the other men returned fire and in the resulting gun battle, all seven were killed.

The killings point again to the murderous character of the operations being conducted by the special forces units scouring Afghanistan. The underlying philosophy of these operations is to shoot first and ask questions later. Since September, ISAF claims it has killed or captured over 368 insurgent "leaders". American commanders boasted last month that 24 rank-and-file insurgents are also being killed or captured every 24 hours by Special Forces. It is unknown how many were actually "Taliban" and how many, like the seven men in Rohani Baba, were simply people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

While ISAF claims it will "investigate" the killings, the activities of what can only be called death squads are aimed at terrorising and intimidating the Afghan population into submitting to the occupation.

News of the massacre provoked a demonstration in Gardez, the capital of Paktia. Hundreds of men erected barricades of burning tyres, chanted "Death to America" and anti-Afghan government slogans and burned an effigy of Barack Obama. Shots were exchanged between Afghan police and armed protestors. A local doctor told Al Jazeera that six civilians and two police had been

hospitalised with wounds.

The incident in Paktia was just one of a series over the past 72 hours that have claimed the lives of dozens of Afghan civilians, as well as insurgents and US troops.

In the eastern province of Kunar, where US forces are carrying out operations along the border with Pakistan, an air strike on Saturday killed 25 alleged insurgents. Other "Taliban" were reportedly killed in a battle with American troops in another district of the province.

In Wardak province, also in the east of the country, special forces shot dead two men who "threatened them" when they stormed into a housing compound on Sunday searching for a Taliban commander. There are few other details except an ISAF claim that one of the dead men was the alleged insurgent leader.

In the northern city of Kunduz, a suicide bomber exploded a vehicle filled with explosives close to an Afghan Army checkpoint on Saturday, killing himself and wounding five Afghan soldiers and nine civilians.

In the southern province of Helmand, 15 men were killed on Friday when the pickup truck they were travelling in was hit by a roadside bomb, rigged by insurgents to attack the occupation troops that are carrying out major operations in the area.

In Kandahar, the main province of the south and the Taliban's previous stronghold, insurgents triggered a car bomb close to a police headquarters on Saturday, injuring five police officers and at least one civilian. Two Afghan government officials were assassinated in the city last week.

On Sunday, a suicide bomber drove a minivan reportedly packed with 2,000 kilograms of explosives into a US base in the town of Sangsar, in the Zhari district of Kandahar province. Reports indicate that the force of the massive blast collapsed the building. Six American and two Afghan government troops were killed, and at least another dozen wounded.

Yesterday's deaths took the overall fatalities among US/ISAF troops this year to 692—479 of whom were Americans. Between 500 and 600 American troops are

also being wounded in Afghanistan every month, many suffering horrifying injuries from roadside bombs.

Helmand and Kandahar, majority ethnic Pashtun provinces where the Taliban still has considerable popular support, are the focus of the Obama administration's surge in Afghanistan, which has seen 30,000 more troops deploy to the country. ISAF now totals close to 150,000 troops.

ISAF has reported over the past week that British paratroopers and Afghan government troops have seized the Nahr-e-Saraj district of Helmand that was once under the effective control of the Taliban. American Marines are engaged in heavy fighting in the Sangin district of Helmand. Thousands of other US troops have occupied key districts of Kandahar, reportedly forcing insurgent fighters to flee the areas.

Alongside the major escalation in the death squad operations by special forces units, there has been a sharp increase in the number of air strikes carried out against alleged insurgent targets.

The purported success of counterinsurgency operations in Helmand and Kandahar underpinned the claims by both Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates following visits to Afghanistan this month that "progress" was being made due to the surge. Obama briefly visited Afghanistan on December 3 and Gates on December 8.

Despite the claims of progress, the Obama White House has shelved any talk of a substantial withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan beginning from July 2011. Instead, the new date being stressed is the "end of 2014", by which time the Afghan army and police will ostensibly be capable of handling most security operations.

A review of the war will be presented this week to the White House by General David Petraeus, the overall commander of ISAF. Broadly unveiling its content, Petraeus told journalists last week: "We believe that we have arrested the momentum of the Taliban in many parts of Afghanistan, but not all."

Petraeus warned, however, that the fighting taking place was the most intense of the war. In Helmand, US Marines have lost 42 dead and over 500 wounded since September 20, when they took over from British forces in key districts such as Sangin. The British, by contrast, who did not have the troop numbers to conduct similar offensives against the Taliban, lost 76 dead in the entire previous three-and-a-half years.

"The enemy fights you when you try to take away areas that matter to him enormously" Petraeus said. "If you

look at the populated areas of Helmand, Sangin is one of the major remaining areas that the Taliban still has control of." A company of heavy tanks is being sent to Helmand to try and stem the high number of casualties being inflicted on American forces by roadside bombs.

Even if the insurgency is largely drowned in blood by 2015, the intention of US imperialism is to leave a large residual force in Afghanistan indefinitely, just as has been done in Iraq. The country provides the US military with a strategic forward base in the resource-rich Central Asian region, where crucial reserves of oil and gas are being opened up for exploitation.

The long-term importance of Afghanistan to US concerns over Central Asian oil and gas was highlighted on Saturday, when the US puppet president of the country, Hamid Karzai, signed a treaty in Ashgabat to resume work on the long-delayed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. The pipeline, conceived of more than 15 years ago, is intended to transport gas from the massive Turkmenistan fields through Afghanistan to Pakistani cities and northern India, providing an alternative to transporting resources via US rivals Iran or Russia.

The pipeline would cost over \$7.6 billion to construct and would have to pass through Kandahar province and other areas where resistance to the occupation is greatest. This fact, as much as any, explains the ruthlessness and indifference to civilian lives with which the US military is seeking to crush the insurgency.



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