

Dozens slaughtered by US forces in Afghanistan-Pakistan air attacks

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In the worst of several US air strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan in recent days, up to 51 civilians were killed last Thursday in Afghanistan's north-eastern Kunar province. General David Petraeus, the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan, expressed the colonial-style hostility of the occupation force's senior command toward the Afghan population, reportedly accusing local residents of burning their children to fake evidence of civilian casualties.

In a five-hour operation on the night of February 17, US Apache helicopters strafed a group of alleged Afghan insurgents with gunfire, rockets and Hellfire missiles. Surveillance drones guided the helicopter assault in the mountainous district of Ghaziabad, near the Pakistan border, and according to the *Washington Post*, bombs were dropped by at least one of the unmanned Predator aircraft. The attack was one of a number of recent US operations in the district, ordered as part of President Barack Obama's broader escalation of the Af-Pak war.

Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, senior military spokesman in Kabul, stated that three dozen people were killed in the incident. He maintained they were all "suspected insurgents who had gathered to attack US and Afghan troops". However, the remarks of one unnamed military official, cited by the *Washington Post* on Monday, made clear that American authorities had no knowledge of the identities of those killed.

Kunar Governor Said Fazlullah Wahidi contradicted Smith's claims. He said: "According to our information 64 people were killed: 13 armed opposition, 22 women, 26 boys and 3 old men." The governor sent a three-man "fact-finding team" to the area on Saturday, which returned with seven injured people suffering burns and shrapnel wounds, including a young man and woman and five boys and girls.

Dr. Asadullah Fazli, chief doctor at the provincial hospital in Asadabad, the capital of Kunar, told the *New York Times* that the hospital had treated at least nine wounded from the

area, including three women, four children and two men. One two-year-old girl had to have her leg amputated because of shrapnel injuries. The *Times* noted: "There were several other military operations in the area over the last few days, so it was not clear which one caused those injuries."

In an attempt to defuse outrage among the Afghan population over the latest atrocity carried out by the occupation forces, President Hamid Karzai issued what has become a pro forma denunciation of American military operations. He stated that "about 50 civilians have been martyred" and pledged to send investigators to the scene of the killings.

Karzai met with his national security council and General Petraeus at the presidential palace in Kabul on Sunday. According to an account of the meeting published in the *Washington Post*, "Petraeus, the top US commander in Afghanistan, dismissed allegations by Karzai's office and the provincial governor that civilians were killed and said residents had invented stories, or even injured their children, to pin the blame on US forces and force an end to the operation."

One unnamed participant in the meeting said: "He claimed that in the midst of the [operation] some pro-Taliban parents in contact with a government official decided to create a civilian casualty claim to pressure international forces to cease the [operation]. They burned hands and legs of some of their children and sent them to the hospital."

The discussion demonstrates the contempt with which the American military command regards Karzai, the figurehead first installed as Washington's stooge shortly after the 2001 invasion.

The *Washington Post* reported that Karzai and his colleagues found Petraeus's baseless allegations "deeply offensive" and "shocking". One official declared: "Killing

60 people, and then blaming the killing on those same people, rather than apologising for any deaths? This is inhuman. This is a really terrible situation.”

Petraeus declined to respond to the published account of his meeting with the Afghan president. The day after his provocative remarks on the Kunar killings, more Afghan civilians were killed in a US air strike. In Qilgha village in Nangarhar province, immediately south of Kunar, a missile destroyed a family’s home, killing the parents and four children aged between three and eight who had been sleeping inside. The father, named Patang, was a member of the Afghan national army.

A provincial official told the AFP news agency that American forces had targeted three insurgents planting mines on nearby road, but had hit the home by mistake. NATO spokesmen confirmed there had been civilian casualties, but said no further details would be released, pending an investigation.

One village resident told *Pajhwok Afghan News* that foreign forces intercepted a vehicle taking the wounded father to hospital, halting it for two hours. “The troops beat us and tied our hands,” the man, Psarlay, said. “Meanwhile, Patang died because of excessive bleeding.”

Another resident, 26-year-old Ezatullah, told the *Wall Street Journal*: “The house was completely destroyed by the strike. Only two children [aged] four and six survived.” He added that “thousands of people attended the funeral of the slain family Monday and are planning a protest against coalition forces Tuesday”.

A report issued February 1 by the Afghanistan Rights Monitor (ARM) tallied at least 2,421 civilian deaths and 3,270 injuries inflicted last year by US-NATO forces, Taliban and resistance groups, and Afghan government police, soldiers, and militia. The violence in 2010 was the worst since the invasion a decade ago. The real casualty rate for civilians is likely to be significantly higher than the ARM tally, with US-NATO forces routinely covering up their crimes and labelling victims as “insurgents” or “terrorists”.

The Obama-Petraeus counter-insurgency strategy effectively centres on the use of overwhelming force against the population, aimed at crushing continued resistance to the occupation of the resource-rich and strategically vital country. At the same time, the Obama administration has illegally extended the war into Pakistan, with US ground

forces active in the border region near Afghanistan, backed by a steady bombardment of CIA drone missile attacks.

On Sunday and Monday, two drone attacks killed a reported 12 people. In the first incident, seven alleged militants were killed—including, according to Pakistani intelligence agents cited by various media outlets, an Iraqi Al Qaeda operative—after multiple missiles struck a house in the tribal agency of South Waziristan. Five more alleged militants were killed the next day in North Waziristan.

These operations mark the resumption of US drone attacks after a four-week pause—the longest period in which Pakistan had not been hit by American missiles since December 2009. The temporary cessation was widely believed to have been connected with Washington’s efforts to secure the release of CIA agent Raymond Davis, arrested on January 27 in Lahore on murder charges. Obama’s bombings have generated enormous anger among ordinary Pakistanis, and destabilised the government in Islamabad. The US government is nevertheless proceeding, underscoring the ruthlessness of its Af-Pak war.

An article in the *Washington Post* on Monday pointed to the indiscriminate character of the missile strikes. It explained that at least 581 alleged militants had been killed by drones in Pakistan last year, but just two of the victims had been previously listed on the US list of “most wanted” terrorists.

“Despite a major escalation in the number of unmanned Predator strikes being carried out under the Obama administration, data from government and independent sources indicate that the number of high-ranking militants being killed as a result has either slipped or barely increased,” the *Washington Post* explained. “Even more generous counts—which indicate that the CIA killed as many as 13 ‘high-value targets’—suggest that the drone program is hitting senior operatives only a fraction of the time.”

The article noted that drones were no longer restricted to striking known targets. Anyone in Pakistan witnessed doing something deemed suspicious, such as travelling to or from alleged terrorist-controlled buildings, could be killed by CIA assassins, operating the drones from Langley, Virginia.



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