

Afghanistan: More children killed in US-NATO air attacks

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A NATO helicopter strike in the southern Afghanistan province of Helmand last Friday killed seven civilians, including three children. The atrocity is the latest in a series of recent US-led bombing operations that have inflicted mass civilian casualties.

Nine children collecting firewood were killed on March 1 in an airstrike in northeastern Kunar province. This prompted desperate apologies from President Barack Obama and General David Petraeus, aimed at placating enormous anger among ordinary Afghans. On March 14 another two children, 10- and 15-year-old brothers, were killed in Kunar. One government official said the boys were carrying shovels on their shoulders that may have been mistaken for weapons. On March 23, a NATO airstrike in eastern Khost province reportedly killed three civilians, including one child. These incidents followed last month's war crime in the Ghaziabad district of Kunar province, where helicopter strikes killed 65 civilians, including 22 women, and 40 children under the age of 13, according to an Afghan government investigation.

Details of the latest incident remain scant. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) ordered an air strike on two vehicles travelling through Helmand's Now Zad district. According to ISAF, the vehicles were believed to be occupied by a "Taliban leader and his associates". A statement acknowledged, without providing details, "Afghan civilians were accidentally killed and wounded in Now Zad district, Helmand province". ISAF added that an investigation was underway.

Two men, two women, and three children were killed, according to Afghan officials in Helmand. Another

three children and two adults were reportedly wounded. According to the Associated Press, provincial authorities said the civilians killed and injured had been in a car near the targeted vehicles. ISAF spokesman Major Tim James said he could not confirm that the Taliban leader had been present.

Helmand's governor, Muhammad Gulab Mangal, issued a statement "strongly condemning" the civilian casualties. Mangal said he would demand "extra caution" from NATO forces operating around civilians.

Now Zad district is among the most heavily contested areas in Helmand Province between US-led forces and Taliban and other anti-occupation fighters. It was one of the areas initially targeted by President Barack Obama's "surge" of additional ground forces two years ago. Hundreds of marines were deployed to Now Zad town as part of "Operation Cobra's Anger", launched in December 2009, and several buildings in the centre were flattened by heavy artillery fire.

Yet the occupation forces still enjoy little control over the area. In a revealing incident, Taliban commanders recently ordered that mobile networks throughout Helmand Province be shut down. A spokesman for the group declared that the ban was to prevent civilian casualties caused by US-led raids based on information provided by their informants over the telephone. No mobile phone communication has been possible in the vast province since March 19.

Ahmad Shah, an engineer and head of the Afghan Wireless Communications Company, explained to Reuters why he had to follow the Taliban order: "The Taliban threaten us to shut down the network and call

us a spy station, on the other hand the government harasses our workers when we listen to the insurgents. We are in a situation to listen to the Taliban rather than the government because there is no protection.”

The absence of mobile phone coverage has limited the spread of news of the latest civilian deaths caused by NATO bombs. The *New York Times* reported: “Local authorities in the province were either unreachable or were unaware of the attack because cellphone service had been out in the entire province for much of the last week on orders of the Taliban ... Dawood Ahmadi, a spokesman for Helmand’s governor, who was in Kandahar on business, said by telephone that he had not been able to get information on the civilian deaths because of the cellphone cutoff.”

Unlike after previous incidents this months, there have not yet been any protests denouncing the occupation forces and their stooge government in Kabul headed by President Hamid Karzai. Tensions nevertheless remain high, with overwhelming opposition among ordinary Afghans against the indefinite foreign occupation of their country.

President Karzai earlier told General Petraeus that his apology for the March 1 killing of nine children was “not enough” and the civilian casualties inflicted by US-NATO bombing raids had to stop. Unsurprisingly, however, US commanders have taken no notice of such statements and the slaughter continues. The indiscriminate use of air power in Afghanistan is regarded as an essential means of terrorising the population into submission—crushing all resistance to the criminal occupation of the resource-rich and strategically vital country.



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