Afghans killed in protest over NATO night raids

Bill Van Auken
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At least a dozen Afghan civilians were shot to death and another 85 wounded in mass protests Wednesday over a NATO night raid that killed four members of a family in the country's northern Takhar province.

Those killed in the raid, two men and two women, reportedly all members of the same family, are only the latest in a series of unarmed civilian victims, including children, who have lost their lives in similar incidents in recent weeks.

A crowd, which at its start was estimated by local journalists at 2,000 peoplemany of them carrying sticks, axes and shovelsmarched into the center of Taloqan, the provincial capital, carrying the bodies of the victims killed in the raid the night before.

The protest, which included many students, is reported to have grown to include as many as 15,000 people. The protesters chanted "Death to America" and demanded justice for those killed.

The crowd came under fire as it marched on a NATO Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) base in Taloqan, where a contingent of approximately 25 German troops are deployed. Some of the protesters threw grenades, Molotov cocktails and rocks over the walls of the base, where two German soldiers and three Afghan guards were reportedly injured.

German troops reportedly came out of the base, and German reinforcements together with elements of the Afghan National Army were brought in from the neighboring province of Kunduz to quell the protest.

Mohammad Hassan Bassejj, a doctor at the Taloqan civil hospital, said that the facility was overwhelmed with the number of wounded, some of whom were in critical condition. Some of the injured had to be transferred to nearby private clinics.

NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) defended the raid in Takhar province, claiming that it had been organized to kill or capture a "facilitator" of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an insurgent group, who was accused of making and transporting weapons and explosives.

It claimed that all those killedincluding the two womenwere shot only after they had pointed weapons at the special forces troops.

ISAF concluded, "Throughout the entire operation the security force was careful to ensure the safety of all civilians," a statement that can only provoke even greater rage among fellow Afghans, who insist that the four dead men and women were themselves civilians. One thing missing from the ISAF statement was any indication that the alleged "facilitator" was either killed or captured in the raid.

While the nationality of the troops involved in the raid was not given by ISAF, in nearly all cases these "kill or capture" raids are carried out by the US military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).

Afghanistan's US-backed President Hamid Karzai, who has made repeated public demands for an end to the "unilateral" night raids by US special forces troops, issued a condemnation of the killings Wednesday. Like the protesters in Taloqan, Karzai charged that those killed were civilians.

A government statement said that Karzai would demand an explanation for the killings from the senior US commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus. "The government of Afghanistan has a duty to assess the circumstances of the deaths of these individuals and demand an explanation from the commander of NATO (in Afghanistan)," the statement said.

While indicative of the mounting tensions between Washington and its puppet government in Kabul, the statement also underscores the impotence of Karzai, who was placed in power by the Bush administration and could not survive without the protection offered him by foreign troops. He is forced to condemn the killings of civilians because of the overwhelming popular outrage they are generating, but he is powerless to alter the tactics of the US-led occupation upon which his regime ultimately rests.

Both General Petraeus and his predecessor Gen. Stanley McChrystal have insisted that the night raids are key to the US strategy for crushing armed resistance to the occupation.

US troops are now carrying out six times as many night raids as two years ago, the verbal protests of the Karzai government notwithstanding. Between December 2010 and February 2011, the number of raids increased to about 20 a night, or 600 every month.

The raids have produced horrific crimes, including the killing of children. In one case last year, Special Forces soldiers dug bullets out of the bodies of two slain pregnant Afghan women

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to cover up their responsibility for the killings.

A series of killings carried out during recent night raids has intensified the anger of ordinary Afghans toward the US-led occupation.

Last Saturday, ISAF acknowledged that US troops "mistakenly" killed a 15-year-old boy in Nangahar province during a Friday night raid that was purportedly organized to capture a Taliban leader. The killing triggered another angry protest, with villagers carrying the boy's body to a local administrative center, where they threw rocks and burned police vehicles. Police fired on the demonstrators, killing at least one of them and wounding five others.

Only days earlier in the same province, US troops killed a 12-year-old girl named Nelofar after blowing up the gate to her family's home and bursting in at 1 am.

"They [foreign troops] hurled a hand grenade at my daughter after she ran out of the room in panic. She was killed on the spot," her father told told Pajhwok Afghan News..

Also killed in the raid was a relative of the family, Shukrullah, a police officer at the provincial police headquarters, who ISAF said had been mistaken for the targeted Taliban leader.

ISAF issued a statement acknowledging that the house was raided by "mistake" and apologizing for the deaths. As always, it insisted that US and other NATO troops go to "great lengths in our operations to reduce civilian casualties to an absolute minimum."

The family rejected this hypocritical apology. "They killed my 12 year-old innocent daughter and my brother-in-law and then told me, 'We are sorry,'" Neik Mohammed, whose home was raided, told the *New York Times*. "What does it mean? What pain can be cured by this word 'sorry'?"

The eruption of the protests in Takhar, which borders Tajikistan to the north, is of particular significance because it has long been considered among the more stable and secure provinces in Afghanistan. It was assigned by NATO to German troops, whose only casualties until now had consisted of two soldiers killed while loading munitions into a truck.

Since the summer of 2009, however, there has been an uptick in armed opposition activity and a surge in fighting beginning with the spring of 2010. This coincided with the beginning of the Obama administration's "surge" of an additional 30,000 US troops into Afghanistan, most of them destined for the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. One of the unintended consequences of this escalation has been the spread of fighting into other regions previously considered secure.

In Takhar, Pashtuns, who form the traditional base of the Taliban, are a minority, with Uzbeks and Tajiks making up the majority of the population. Under conditions in which local ethnically based warlords dominate much of the region, many Pashtuns look to the Taliban as a protector against them.

The clashes in Takhar follow on the heels of violence in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, the country's third largest, where protesters stormed a United Nations office, killing seven people. As in Takhar, Tajiks and Uzbeks form the majority of the population.

While the US military offensive has been concentrated in southern Afghanistan, the Pentagon's strategy has been based on turning over relatively stable areas of the country to Afghan security forces, allowing the Obama administration to make relatively token withdrawals of US units in July as the White House promised. The deteriorating situation in the north combined with the poor performance of Afghan National Army and police units calls that strategy seriously into question.

Meanwhile, a study released this week by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS), based on interviews done with men in the southern areas of Afghanistan where the Obama administration's surge has been concentrated, found that the increased fighting has only generated growing hostility to American occupation forces.

The study found that almost 90 percent of those polled believed that the US-led military operations were bad for them, and over half said that their opinion of foreign troops was more negative now than it was a year ago. The survey polled 1,400 men of fighting age in over a dozen areas of southern Afghanistan.

"If someone doesn't get on the 'hearts and minds' campaign, the military successes are at risk," warned Norine MacDonald, the president of ICOS, which is funded by the United Nations, the European Union, private foundations and several governments.

The reality is that the rising hostility to the nearly decade-old US occupation is not the result of a failure to pursue "hearts and minds" public relations efforts, but rather of the inevitable resistance of the Afghan people to wholesale violence and neocolonial subjugation.

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