

US air strikes kill women and children in Afghanistan

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7 July 2011

At least eight women and two children were killed Wednesday when a NATO warplane dropped a bomb on a house in Afghanistan's eastern Khost district.

The house was targeted after members of an armed resistance group sought shelter there while fleeing a combined force of US and Afghan National Army troops, the provincial police chief, Sardar Mohammed Zazai told the *New York Times*.

Earlier Wednesday, several hundred Afghans took to the streets in an angry protest over a US-NATO air raid that claimed the lives of two young shepherds in Ghazni province, southwest of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul.

According to Reuters, over 250 villagers marched from villages in the Khogyani district to the provincial capital, Ghazni City, carrying the shrouded bodies of the boys and chanting "death to foreign troops."

The air strikes were only the latest in a series of military actions that have claimed the lives of Afghan civilians. As in all such attacks, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) claimed that the air strikes were carried out against legitimate military targets.

In regard to the bombing in Khost that killed 10 women and children, the *Times* reported: "A NATO spokesman said he was familiar with the attack but did not have details yet and said that there may have been civilians present in the place where the Taliban took shelter."

An ISAF spokesman claimed that only one person was killed in the Ghazni strike, after he had been seen digging, supposedly to plant an improvised explosive device.

The local residents who demonstrated, however, insisted that the two victims, both under the age of 15, were killed while herding cattle and were not "insurgents."

These latest civilian deaths came on the heels of an admission by the British Ministry of Defense that one of its Reaper drones was responsible for a missile attack that killed at least four civilians and wounded two others in what was purportedly a strike aimed at a Taliban commander.

The ministry confirmed a report published in the *Guardian* Wednesday that revealed the pilotless drone, operated by British personnel stationed at a US air base in Nevada, was responsible for the killings.

"On 25 March, a UK Reaper was tasked to engage and

destroy two pickup trucks," the statement from the defense ministry read. "Sadly, four Afghan civilians were also killed and a further two Afghan civilians were injured," the ministry admitted, declaring its "deep regrets."

These latest reports of civilian casualties come amid mounting indications that the phased withdrawal of the US troops sent into Afghanistan as part of the Obama administration's surge announced in December 2009 will mean an escalation of the bloodshed.

Army Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, the commander of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command in Afghanistan, gave the first concrete details of the planned drawdown in a video briefing of Pentagon reporters Wednesday. He said that 800 Iowa National Guard troops would be pulled out of Kabul and neighboring Parwan province this month, and that 800 Marines deployed in Helmand province would be withdrawn in the fall. Neither contingents are to be replaced.

In his speech last month, Obama announced that 10,000 US troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan this year, with 23,000 more to be pulled out by the end of September 2012. This represents only the troops ordered into Afghanistan in December 2009, when the US president claimed that the escalation would create conditions for pulling out all of the US forces. Even after these withdrawals, some 70,000 US troops will remain, nearly double the number deployed in Afghanistan when Obama took office.

Rodriguez said that plans for withdrawing more troops beyond the 1,600 he referred to would not be worked out until the fall. The Pentagon's aim is to proceed as slowly as possible, maintaining US combat strength intact through the so-called summer fighting season, when the Taliban and other armed opposition groups traditionally launch offensives.

In his final press conference before reassignment to the US, Rodriguez claimed limited success for the surge, pointing to what the military claims is 1,000 "insurgents" killed over the past six months, a 250 percent increase over the body count given by the Pentagon for the same period last year.

Echoing remarks made by his superior, Gen. David Petraeus, on July 4, Rodriguez said that the US military planned to "end up thinning out [US forces in the south] and then focusing more

and more of our energy in the east.” He said that the timing of this shift would be “conditions-based” and would require an effort to “synchronize” US efforts with the Pakistani military across the border.

Petraeus, who is giving up the Afghanistan command to become director of the Central Intelligence Agency, told the Associated Press that by next fall “more special forces, intelligence, surveillance, air power will be concentrated in areas along Afghanistan’s rugged eastern border with Pakistan,” along with Afghan puppet troops.

The plan poses an increased spread of the war across the border into Pakistan and the threat of a far wider and more dangerous conflict.

Since last month, the Afghan-Pakistan border, the so-called Durand Line drawn by the British colonial rulers in the 19th Century, has been the scene of stepped up fighting. On Wednesday, armed groups overran Afghan border check posts, killing two dozen Afghan police in northeastern Nuristan province.

Last month, armed groups operating out of Afghanistan’s Kunar province staged attacks on Pakistani forces across the border, killing 56 Pakistani paramilitary soldiers and tribal police.

The Pakistani military has responded with sustained artillery and rocket barrages that have killed dozens of Afghan civilians and forced over 1,000 people to flee their homes.

Several hundred people demonstrated Tuesday in Asadabad, the capital of Kunar province, chanting slogans denouncing Pakistan and its military intelligence agency, the ISI. Demonstrators also demanded that the Afghan government take action or give the people on the border arms.

The government of US-backed President Hamid Karzai, however, exerts little power in the region and is itself increasingly beset by crisis as Washington unfolds its military plans.

The country’s parliament this week began debating a proposal for Karzai’s impeachment over his creation of a special tribunal to investigate the rampant fraud and corruption in the 2009 elections. Two weeks ago, the tribunal demanded the ouster of 62 members of the parliament elected last year, roughly one quarter of the body. Symptomatic of the atmosphere of crisis in the Afghan capital, the Pajhwok news agency reported that members of the parliament had begun carrying guns to legislative sessions.

Amid the corruption and paralysis within the Afghan puppet regime, there is also a growing threat of economic breakdown. The regime is at loggerheads with the International Monetary Fund over the corruption scandal gripping the Kabul Bank, the country’s largest financial institution, where some \$900 million has gone missing, much of it lent out to members of Karzai’s coterie. The IMF action could hold up aid from a number of donor countries and institutions. Foreign aid and Western military spending account for 95 percent of Afghanistan’s

economic activity.

Meanwhile, four more NATO troops were reported killed Tuesday, three in a roadside blast and a fourth in an attack by armed opposition elements.

Last month was the bloodiest for the US-led occupation troops since the year began, with 65 troops killed, 45 of them American. Since Washington launched its “Operation Enduring Freedom” in Afghanistan in October 2001, it has claimed the lives of 2,570 troops, 1,650 of them from the United States.

There is no accurate count of Afghan casualties, which are believed to number in the tens of thousands. Civilian casualties have spiked sharply since the Obama administration initiated its surge.

Last month, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) issued a report to the UN Security Council citing a 51 percent increase in violence in the second quarter of 2011 compared to the same quarter last year, resulting in 2,950 civilian casualties in the three-month period.

The United Nations has sought to whitewash the scale of carnage being carried out by the US-led occupation troops, blaming the spike in violence on the armed opposition groups. It severely underestimates the number of unarmed men, women and children killed by US night raids and air strikes, largely by adopting an unquestioning attitude toward Washington’s own claims about the number and identity of those its forces are killing.

In any case, the rise in civilian casualties is blamed by the majority of the population on the foreign occupation. As a report produced last March by the UN, in conjunction with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, stressed, there is “a greater perception by the wider Afghan community that the presence of international forces is responsible for higher levels of insecurity, is the cause for greater numbers of civilian casualties regardless of the perpetrator, and that international forces act with impunity.”

This “perception” is grounded in the daily violence and humiliations inflicted by foreign occupation on the people of Afghanistan. The attempts by Washington to secure its interests in the country with another round of military escalation will only yield more bloodshed and more resistance.



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