

US retaliation in Afghanistan in wake of helicopter downing

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The Pentagon claimed Wednesday to have killed the resistance fighters responsible for last week's downing of a helicopter that resulted in the worst US losses to date in the decade-old war in Afghanistan.

Gen. John Allen, the chief US military commander in Afghanistan, told the media that an air strike early Tuesday by a US F-16 fighter jet killed Mullah Mohibullah, a Taliban leader, along with several fighters, including the one who fired a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) into a CH-47 Chinook helicopter on August 6, killing 30 American troops along with seven Afghan soldiers and a civilian Afghan interpreter.

The downing of the helicopter inflicted the largest casualty toll for any single incident since the US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. The deaths brought to 1,731 the total number of US troops killed in Operation Enduring Freedom, which began with that invasion. Another 932 troops from Britain, Canada, France, Germany and a number of other countries have also been killed in the war and occupation.

The latest loss was compounded by the fact that 22 of the Americans killed were part of the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, commonly known as SEAL Team Six, one of the US military's most elite special operations units, whose members were responsible for the May raid that ended in the assassination of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

"We tracked them and dealt with them in a kinetic strike," said General Allen.

Allen also contradicted earlier reports that the SEALs had been sent in to rescue an Army Ranger unit engaged in combat with Afghan opposition forces. Instead, he said, they had been ordered to head off Taliban elements who were "escaping" the Ranger force.

The announcement represented the most explicit admission yet by the Pentagon that the devastating helicopter downing—which is still officially referred to as a "crash"—was the result of armed action by Afghan fighters opposed to the 10-year-old US occupation of their country.

The Pentagon has drawn some comfort from its conclusion that the crash was caused by an RPG, a short-range anti-tank weapon, rather than a surface-to-air missile of the type the CIA supplied in large quantities to the Afghan mujahedin guerrillas, who used them to great effect in fighting Soviet troops in the 1980s.

The F-16 strike is part of a wider campaign of retaliation in the Tangi Valley area of Afghanistan's central-eastern Maidan Wardak province, where the shooting down of the helicopter took place. The predominantly Pashtun province has long been a stronghold of the Taliban, which claims to control three-quarters of the province. The US military had recently withdrawn troops from the area's only combat post, where American forces reported being under constant fire.

According to a report by Pajhwok Afghan News (PAN), US troops have been "detaining and harassing civilians" in the area since the downing of the Chinook helicopter.

Naimatullah, a resident of the area, told PAN that "US forces had besieged the Tangi Valley and have been searching people's houses." He added that anyone leaving his home was subject to arrest.

The news agency quoted a teacher at the local Imam Abu Hanifa High School, who confirmed that "a large number of foreign soldiers had surrounded the area."

PAN said the teacher "warned of a humanitarian crisis if the siege of the populous area was not lifted. The residents are currently unable to take their patients to hospital, lack edibles and other essential items."

More ominously, the news agency quoted a journalist who met soldiers of the Afghan National Army (ANA) while en route to Tangi Valley. He said they warned him that "if you love your life, don't go there; otherwise you will be killed."

While the US media has been filled with tributes to the dead Navy SEALs and reports of both official and private mourning, the White House and the Pentagon have sought desperately to deny that the devastating attack has any military significance.

"This one single incident does not represent any kind of watershed or trend," Pentagon spokesman Col. Dave Lapan

told the media. “We still have the Taliban on the run, we’ve reversed the momentum that they had. But they are still going to inflict casualties. That’s what they do.” Lapan said that the military’s Special Operation Command would “soldier on” despite the SEAL unit having lost approximately 10 percent of its members.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, speaking Monday at a change of command ceremony at the Special Operations Command headquarters in Florida, called the mass casualties a “reminder to the American people that we remain a nation at war.” He added, “As heavy a loss as this was, it would be even more tragic if we allowed it to derail this country from our efforts to defeat Al Qaeda and deny them a safe haven in Afghanistan.”

Panetta has invoked Al Qaeda as frequently as his predecessors in the Bush administration to justify the US war, even though the US military and intelligence agencies acknowledge that there is no significant presence of the terrorist movement in Afghanistan.

In a televised statement on the troop deaths, President Obama sounded a similar note, vowing that the US would “press on and succeed” in Afghanistan. “Our troops will continue the hard work of transitioning to a stronger Afghan government and ensuring that Afghanistan is not a safe haven for terrorists,” he said.

From the outset, the Pentagon has attempted to limit coverage of the shooting down of the helicopter. One senior military official told Bloomberg News that information on the attack had been tightly restricted because “a cone of silence had been ordered from the top.” The media was also barred from covering the return of the SEALs’ remains to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where Obama spent several hours Tuesday, meeting with families of the dead. The Pentagon claimed that the shooting down, crashing and burning of the helicopter had made it impossible to identify any of the remains, and therefore no individual family could authorize media coverage.

Notwithstanding the attempts by the White House and the Pentagon to deny the significance of this, the most catastrophic loss for the US military in 10 years of war, the episode is highly revealing as to the way in which the US intervention in Afghanistan is evolving.

With Obama’s announcement in June that the US will withdraw 10,000 troops by the end of this year and 33,000 by September 2012, part of a supposed transition to Afghan forces assuming responsibility for security in 2014, Washington’s colonial-style war is entering a new and even bloodier stage.

Increasingly, the US military will be compelled to pull troops out of different areas of Afghanistan, as it did in Maidan Wardak, creating more favorable conditions for the

armed groups opposed to foreign occupation and the US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai.

The US command will be forced to rely more heavily on night raids by special operations troops, like the one that ended so catastrophically last week, as well as air strikes to quell resistance.

Both of these tactics have been continuously cited by Afghans as the most hated by the Afghan people, both for their infliction of casualties and their humiliation of civilians by armed squads bursting into their homes in the middle of the night. Afghan officials as well as US military analysts have repeatedly warned that these methods provide the Taliban and other armed opposition groups with their most effective recruiting tools.

To pursue its strategy of maintaining US strategic control over Afghanistan while withdrawing troops, the Pentagon will inevitably be drawn into a cycle of air strikes, raids and reprisals that will spell a further escalation in the killing and wounding of Afghans and US troops alike.

Meanwhile, the bleak prospects for the US turning over security to Afghan puppet forces was underscored by a pair of incidents on Tuesday night in which US-led occupation troops engaged in fierce firefights with Afghan police units in southern Kandahar Province and the eastern province of Ghazni.

In Kandahar, the fighting took place in Arghandab, a farming district outside of Kandahar City. District officials said that the clash left four Afghan policemen dead and four wounded. Shah Mohammed, the top official for the district, said that it was not known what had started the fight. “Right now we only have this very sad news from here,” he said.

The incident in Ghazni took place at a police checkpoint outside of Ghazni City. The Afghan police reportedly saw armed men and asked them to stop and identify themselves. When they failed to do so, a firefight ensued. No American or Afghan forces were killed in the incident.



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