

In wake of Afghan massacre, tensions mount between US and its puppet Karzai

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In public statements Friday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai denounced the US military in connection with last Sunday's massacre of 16 civilians, but President Barack Obama made it clear in a telephone conversation that Washington had no intention of ceding to his demand that it immediately turn over security to Afghan forces.

The contradictory positions of the Afghan president reflect the increasingly difficult balancing act he is performing, attempting on the one hand to identify himself with the rising tide of popular anger against the more than 10-year US-led occupation, while remaining utterly dependent upon foreign troops to prevent the toppling of his puppet regime.

Tensions between Washington and the regime in Kabul have escalated sharply in the wake of the massacre, particularly in relation to statements by Karzai calling for a withdrawal of all US forces from rural areas and villages to major bases and demanding that all security operations be turned over to Afghan troops in 2013, a year ahead of the official schedule announced by the Pentagon and NATO.

The Afghan president went further Friday, condemning the US military for failing to cooperate with an investigation ordered by his government into the mass killings, which took place in the Panjawi district of Afghanistan's southern Kandahar province. Half of the victims were children, ages 2 through 12.

Karzai's charge came in the midst of a tense meeting with family members of the 16 people slain last Sunday. Press accounts indicated that the surviving relatives were openly hostile toward the Afghan president. According to a Reuters account, "Some at the meeting shouted, some demanded answers, but all said they wanted any soldiers involved punished."

"I don't want any compensation. I don't want money. I don't want a trip to Mecca. I don't want a house. I want nothing. But what I absolutely want is the punishment of the Americans. This is my demand, my demand, my demand and my demand," one villager, whose brother was shot dead in the massacre, told Karzai.

Hajji Abdul Samad Aka, who lost his eight children, his

wife, brother and sister-in-law in the slaughter, told the Afghan president furiously, "Our families are finished and our houses are destroyed." He demanded, "Why did this happen? Do you have any answers, Mr. President?"

"No, I do not," Karzai responded.

Karzai appeared to embrace the villagers' charge that more than one US soldier was involved in the massacre. "In his family, in four rooms people were killed, children and women were killed," said Karzai. "And then they were all brought to one room and put on fire. That one man cannot do."

The US military has insisted that the slaughter was the work of one "rogue" Army staff sergeant, who is said to have "snapped." Unnamed Pentagon officials Friday identified the soldier as Robert Bales. The Pentagon had previously refused to identify him, reportedly out of fears for the safety of his family.

John Henry Browne, the Seattle defense attorney representing Bales, said the soldier was being brought back to a maximum security Army prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas on Friday. He suggested that he could mount a defense based on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition with which some 75,000 US troops have been diagnosed and from which as many as 225,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are suspected to suffer.

Bales had served three combat tours in Iraq before being sent to Afghanistan. According to Browne, he and his family had been led to believe that he would not be deployed a fourth time, but then he was suddenly ordered to Afghanistan. The lawyer also reported that Bales saw one of his friends have his legs blown off the day before the massacre.

In the meeting with Karzai Friday, the Afghan Army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Sher Mohammad Karimi, charged that US military authorities "ignored and blocked" his attempt to investigate the massacre and prevented Afghan officials from interviewing Bales, citing the soldier's right to remain silent under US law.

If the widespread belief in Afghanistan that the killings

were the work of more than one soldier is confirmed, the effect could prove devastating.

Villagers have reportedly testified that they put up no resistance to the massacre because they assumed it was one of the frequent night raids conducted by US special forces troops in the attempt to hunt down and kill or capture supporters of the Taliban and others resisting the US-led occupation.

Karzai himself has demanded an end to the night raids. The US military has made it plain it will not bow to the will of a regime that it placed in power, insisting that the raids, which have provoked outrage throughout Afghanistan, are an essential tool in its counterinsurgency strategy.

Similarly, Washington and NATO have lost no time in rebuffing Karzai's calls for a redeployment of occupation troops to major bases and an accelerated transfer of security operations to Afghan forces. ABC News said that Pentagon officials dismissed the demands as "bluster."

President Obama made an unusual post-midnight call to Karzai on Friday, which White House officials claim was to congratulate the Afghan president on the birth of a child. However, the White House released a statement on the conversation in which it claimed that Obama and Karzai had "reaffirmed our shared commitment" to a timetable under which "Afghan forces would complete the process of transition and have full responsibility for security across the country by the end of 2014."

According to Karzai, however, Obama demanded in relation to the call for US forces to pull back to their bases, "Did you announce this?" Karzai said he told Obama he had. The Afghan president said he also told Obama that, as there were already plans to turn over security operations to Afghan forces by the end 2014, they should just move the deadline up a year.

In reality, Washington has no confidence that Afghan army and police forces will be capable of defending the US-backed regime even well after 2014. US officials have been negotiating a long-term "strategic partnership" agreement that would keep thousands of American troops in Afghanistan indefinitely and secure permanent US military bases in the country. The massacre, coming on the heels of the outrage last month over the burning of Korans by US military personnel and the January release of a video showing US Marines laughing and urinating over the corpses of slain Afghans, has significantly complicated these negotiations.

Pentagon spokesman George Little commented Thursday that the US military understood Karzai's "strong interest in moving toward a fully independent and sovereign Afghanistan," but cautioned that this "needs to be done in a responsible manner."

There could not be a clearer statement that Afghanistan is under the semi-colonial rule of the US, with its government a puppet of the military occupation.

Also on Friday, a military helicopter went down in Kabul, crashing into a house and killing at least 12 Turkish troops on board as well as two women on the ground. NATO claimed that there was no insurgent activity in the area and that the cause of the crash was under investigation. It was the worst such incident for the occupation since 30 American personnel, including 22 Navy SEAL commandos, were killed in a helicopter crash in eastern Afghanistan in August of last year.

NATO also confirmed that one of its soldiers died Friday from wounds suffered from a roadside bomb in eastern Afghanistan.

Total US deaths in the war have risen to 1,912, with over half—965—having been killed since Obama announced his "surge" in December 2009.

The cost of the war for American soldiers was further driven home this month with the report issued by a task force formed by the Army to study the impact of improvised explosive devices. It found that the number of US troops suffering amputations as a result of their wounds had hit an all-time high in 2011, with 240 losing at least one arm or leg.

The number surpassed the toll suffered during the height of the military surge in Iraq under the Bush administration in 2007, when 205 soldiers and Marines lost limbs to the war.

According to the *Army Times*: "The most 'dramatic changes' in the wounds coming out of Afghanistan were the increased number of troops with above the knee amputations of both legs, triple and quadruple amputations, and the associated genital injuries, the task force reported."



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