

US troops kill Afghan four-year-old

Bill Van Auken
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Afghan officials Friday condemned the killing of a four-year-old child by US Marines in the country's southern Helmand province after he was reportedly mistaken for the "enemy."

"We have called...for an absolute end to ISAF/NATO military operations on homes and villages in order to avoid such killings where innocent children or civilians are the victims," President Hamid Karzai's spokesman Aimal Faizi told the media in commenting on the child's death.

Authorities in Helmand province told the Reuters news agency that the shooting took place on Wednesday. The Marines "thought he was an enemy and opened fire," a spokesman for the governor reported. The grievously wounded child was taken to a hospital where he died.

Lieut. Gen. Will Griffin, speaking for the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), said that NATO and Afghan investigators were looking into the killing. "We want to express our deep regret to the family who has to cope with the loss of a beloved son."

On Friday, NBC News quoted Assistant Police Chief Abdullah Chopan from the Nadali District of Helmand Province as saying the shooting was "likely to have happened because visibility was not good, it was raining and cloudy." Chopan also said that the child was a girl, not a boy as had initially been reported.

The tragic slaying of the toddler has come amid deepening tensions between Washington and the Kabul government over a bilateral security agreement that would allow some 12,000 US troops to remain in the country indefinitely after the official end of the US-led occupation at the end of this year.

Civilian casualties have provoked broad popular hostility to the more than decade-old US-led occupation, and the Karzai government has repeatedly demanded an end to night raids and attacks on Afghan villages by foreign troops as a condition for reaching

the security agreement.

The Obama administration has issued ultimatums as recently as Monday demanding that the pact be concluded "within weeks, not months," or the US could pull out all its forces and cut off aid to Kabul. The US ambassador to Afghanistan, however, warned in a secret cable obtained by the *Washington Post* that Karzai has no intention of having the agreement signed until after the election of a new president in a vote set for April.

Further aggravating friction between Washington and Kabul, the Karzai government ordered the release of 72 prisoners held at the formerly US-run detention facility near Bagram air base, declaring that some of them had been held for seven years without charges or any verifiable evidence against them.

The prison formally passed from US to Afghan control last March, but US officials claim that there had been agreement to consult Washington on any prisoner releases. A State Department spokeswoman Thursday labeled those being set free as "dangerous criminals against whom there is strong evidence linking them to terror-related crimes."

The Afghan government, however, insists that the decision was made by an independent commission formed to review the cases of those held. The commission had already freed 540 prisoners previously held by US occupation authorities, while sending 114 for trial on various charges.

The controversy has provoked a nationalist reaction in Afghanistan, with the Pashto daily *Sarnawesht* publishing a January 7 editorial entitled "America's demand or Afghanistan's laws?" The editorial stated: "In order to justify the crimes they have committed and in order to prevent the innocent prisoners from claiming in the courts in Afghanistan, the US and the world that they were imprisoned illegally and that they should be reimbursed the sustained losses, the

American officials try to prove them as criminals.”

“This is an internal matter of our own sovereignty. This not about our relationship with the United States,” Karzai’s spokesman said. He went further and accused the US authorities of continuing to run secret “black” prisons where Afghans are held without charges and subjected to torture.

Also likely to aggravate tensions between Washington and Kabul, Robert Gates, in his memoir *Duty*, writes that the US government attempted to oust Karzai during the 2009 presidential election in what the former US defense secretary characterized as a “clumsy and failed putsch.”

“It was ugly: our partner, the president of Afghanistan, was tainted, and our hands were dirty as well,” *Foreign Policy* magazine quoted Gates as writing in the new book.

Karzai has repeatedly charged that the US had interfered in the last election—which was rife with fraud—and has justified postponing the signing of the security agreement until after the next election on the grounds of professed concerns that it will do so again.

While the Obama administration has threatened to resort to a “zero option,” withdrawing all troops and cutting off military aid, unless Karzai signs the bilateral deal soon, the Afghan president appears to be confident that American strategic interests will compel Washington to accept his terms. The Pentagon and the US intelligence complex are loathe to give up bases in Afghanistan, which provide a forward operating platform in relation to China, Iran, South Asia and the energy-rich former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

A National Intelligence Estimate on Afghanistan, representing the consensus view of the 16 US intelligence agencies, was presented to the White House at the end of last year. It warned, according to the *Washington Post*, that if all US forces are withdrawn, the country will “descend into chaos quickly,” with large territories falling under the control of the Taliban and other anti-government forces and increasing challenges to its control over the capital of Kabul. The newspaper said that the report indicated that whatever gains had been made by the Obama administration’s military “surge” in Afghanistan would be “significantly eroded by 2017,” even if the residual US force remains.

While the Obama administration is anxious to get an

agreement to keep troops in Afghanistan until 2024 and beyond, the American people are overwhelmingly against it. A CNN poll made public two weeks ago showed nearly three quarters of the population opposing any US troops remaining in Afghanistan after 2014. More than half indicated that troops still in the country should be pulled out sooner than next December.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon has concluded that the crash of a Black Hawk helicopter last month in which six US troops were killed was the result of armed action by the Taliban, CNN reported. It was the single deadliest incident in all of 2013 and the worst casualty incident since another helicopter crash killed seven Americans and four Afghans in August 2012.

At least 2,164 US troops have been killed in the Afghanistan war, two thirds of them since February 2009, when President Barack Obama announced the initiation of his military “surge.”



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