

US air strike kills five special operations troops in Afghanistan

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In what may be the bloodiest “friendly fire” incident involving US troops in 13 years of war and occupation in Afghanistan, five special operations soldiers were killed Monday in an air strike they themselves had called in against Afghan insurgents who ambushed their patrol.

The incident took place in a remote area of southern Zabul province, which borders Kandahar and is a center of armed opposition to the US-backed regime in Kabul.

The deaths came just days before the June 14 second round of Afghan presidential elections and in the wake of US President Barack Obama’s announcement of plans for a drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan, now numbering approximately 33,000 out of a total of nearly 50,000 US, NATO and other foreign forces that occupy the country.

“The casualties occurred during a security operation when the unit came into contact with enemy forces,” the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said in a statement Tuesday. “Tragically, there is the possibility that fratricide may have been involved. The incident is under investigation.”

Afghan sources, however, left no doubt that the deaths were caused by a US air strike. “After an operation, the troops were on the way back to their base when they were ambushed by the Taliban,” an aide to the governor of Zabul province told the *Wall Street Journal*. “They called on an air strike, and the strike mistakenly killed them.” The official reported that, in addition to the five American special operations troops, an Afghan army officer and an Afghan interpreter were also killed.

In a statement published online, a spokesman for the Taliban, Qari Mohammad Yusof Ahmadi, said fighters from the Arghandab District in Zabul Province reported that they had “conducted an armed attack on invading

forces in the Magzak area near Qala village of this district at 2100 [local time] last night.”

The statement continued: “Following the attack, enemy helicopters arrived in the area and heavily bombarded their own soldiers, who were on foot. Eyewitnesses say that they saw half of the body of one invading soldier, the body of another invading soldier and 17 hands and feet at the scene of the incident. All praises be to God mojahedin [Taliban fighters] were not hurt in the clash.”

An NBC News report, however, quoted US officials as saying the strike was carried out by a B-1 Stealth bomber and “somehow went terribly awry.”

Similar “friendly fire” incidents have taken place throughout the 13 years of the Afghan war, in which US and other foreign forces have relied heavily on air support to defend themselves from Afghan forces opposing the occupation.

Just last March, five Afghan Army soldiers were killed in the eastern province of Logar after a NATO air strike was called in against their position. And in 2002, four Canadian troops died when a US warplane dropped a bomb on them as they were carrying out a live-fire exercise.

US use of air power became a major bone of contention between the US military and the puppet government of President Hamid Karzai, who condemned air strikes carried out against villages and other populated areas for inflicting high numbers of civilian casualties.

He made an end to both air strikes and night raids against Afghan homes a condition for signing a bilateral security agreement with the US providing for the continued deployment of American troops in the country. Karzai has still not signed the agreement, which Washington insists must include guarantees that

no American forces will be liable under Afghan or international law for war crimes carried out in the country.

However, both contenders in the June 14 run-off election—Abdullah Abudllah, a former “foreign minister” for the warlords of the Northern Alliance, and Ashraf Ghani, a former senior official at the World Bank and a US citizen—have both vowed to sign the deal demanded by Washington and made clear they will subordinate themselves to US interests.

While Obama announced last month that the US military presence in Afghanistan would be reduced to 9,800 troops by the beginning of 2015, and US officials have indicated that only some 1,000 US troops would still be in the country after 2016, there is no doubt that the kind of fighting that resulted in the “friendly fire” deaths of the five special operations soldiers Monday will continue indefinitely.

Pentagon officials revealed last week that out of the 9,800 US soldiers and Marines who will remain in Afghanistan at the beginning of 2015, at least 1,800, or close to 20 percent, will be special operations forces dedicated to conducting so-called “anti-terror” operations alongside elements of the Afghan Army. US officials said that they are counting on the American special ops forces being augmented by their counterparts from Britain and Australia.

While Washington has claimed that these operations will be directed against Al Qaeda, American military and intelligence officials have long acknowledged that the Al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan is negligible. The real target of these attacks are the Taliban and other armed groups opposed to the US-led occupation and the Western-backed regime in Kabul.

US military forces remaining behind in Afghanistan will be augmented by thousands of private contractors, whose numbers will significantly exceed those of American uniformed personnel. Last month, the web site Salon reported the details of a leaked document from SAIC, one of the largest US military and intelligence contractors. The document outlines the main areas covered by a five-year, \$400 million contract between the Pentagon and the corporation. These include “Expeditionary Warfare, Irregular Warfare, Special Operations, Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations.” The deal, which expires in 2015, is being renewed.

The article quoted a spokesman for the Pentagon agency handling the contract as saying these deadly functions could be contracted out to private contractors because they “do not require either the exercise of discretion in applying government authority or the making of value judgments in making decisions for the government.”

The latest casualties bring the total number of American deaths in “Operation Enduring Freedom,” as the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan was dubbed, to 2,330. The total number of US-led foreign occupation troops killed has risen to 3,449, including 453 British soldiers, 158 Canadians and others from 27 different countries.

Afghan casualties certainly number in the many tens of thousands. Last year alone, nearly 3,000 civilians were killed. According to a report issued by the International Crisis Group, the number of casualties in the same year—both killed and wounded—rose to an estimated 9,500 for anti-government fighters and 8,200 for Afghan security forces.



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