

US air strikes kill scores of civilians in Afghanistan

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4 November 2016

US airstrikes claimed the lives of scores of civilians in northern Afghanistan Thursday, following a firefight between US-backed Afghan troops and Taliban fighters in which at least two US special forces “advisers” were killed.

The bombing, which continued through much of the night, targeted the village of Bouz Kandahari, on the outskirts of the northern city of Kunduz, where US and Afghan special operations troops had mounted an assassination raid late Wednesday aimed at eliminating two senior leaders of the Taliban. They came under heavy fire, leading to the deaths of the two American soldiers and the wounding of four others. Three Afghan special forces troops were also killed. The Pentagon euphemistically described the operation as a “train, advise and assist mission.”

A spokesman for the governor of Kunduz put the number of civilians killed in the air raids at 30. Residents and others, however, said the real number of dead was significantly higher.

Amruddin, the local representative on the provincial council, said at least 100 civilians had been killed or wounded in the bombing raids. A local resident said that 50 had been killed and between 40 and 50 wounded. Another survivor said at least 70 people had been taken to a local hospital.

As many as 50 homes were demolished by the US bombs, and more victims were feared buried in the rubble.

Outraged relatives of the dead and residents of the village staged a protest march on the governor’s palace, chanting, “Death to America” and “Death to [Afghan President Ashraf] Ghani.” The protesters used pickup trucks to carry the bodies of the dead, most of them women and children. One man held aloft the headless body of an infant. Police stopped them before

they could reach their destination.

“What did these children do wrong? I want justice for the killers,” one resident told Al Jazeera.

Taza Gul, another local resident, told the Pajhwok Afghan News: “I was working on my farm when the bombardment started. On coming home, I saw seven members of my family, including women and children, killed in the raids.”

The civilian death toll in Thursday’s bombings represented the worst atrocity carried out by the US military since the deliberate targeting of a Doctors without Borders (MSF) hospital in Kunduz by a US AC-130 gunship killed at least 42 patients and medical staff and wounded another 37 in October 2015.

That attack followed the Taliban’s seizure of the strategic northern city. Despite extensive combat operations in the ensuing year, Kunduz remains insecure and surrounded by territory controlled by the Taliban. Last month, Taliban fighters came close to overrunning it once again.

More than 15 years after the US invaded Afghanistan and nearly two years after President Barack Obama claimed an end to American combat operations, nearly 10,000 US troops remain deployed there along with a considerably larger number of military contractors. US warplanes have conducted more than 700 airstrikes so far this year, twice as many as in 2015.

By all discernible measures, the crisis of the US occupation and the regime that it has installed in Kabul is deeper than ever.

More than 1,600 civilians were killed in just the first six months of 2016, the highest death toll for a half-year period since the UN began keeping figures in 2009.

Afghan security forces, meanwhile, have also suffered record losses. Between January and August of

this year, 5,523 Afghan National Army and Afghan National Defense and Security Forces troops have been killed (more than twice as many deaths than the US military has suffered in Afghanistan in 15 years), with nearly twice as many wounded.

Between casualties and desertions, the Afghan security forces are growing weaker rather than stronger, despite the more than \$60 billion the US has poured into arming and training them.

Last September, Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a congressional committee that the state of the war was “roughly a stalemate.”

A report released last month by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) also reported 101 “insider attacks” in which Afghan soldiers turned on their own units, killing 257 and wounding 125 in the first eight months of the year. Three Americans, two soldiers and a civilian, were killed in such an incident last month at a training base near Kabul.

The SIGAR report found that the Taliban today controls more of the country than at any time since the US invasion of 2001. It also stated that the rates of poverty, unemployment, underemployment, violence, emigration and internal displacement are all on the rise.

The United Nations found that more than a million people had been displaced last year and another million Afghans are “on the move” within the country’s borders this year because of the violence, creating the conditions for a massive humanitarian crisis. The country is the second biggest source of refugees, trailing only Syria, and as many as 100,000 could be sent back after being denied asylum in Europe.

Despite the depth of this crisis and the fact that more US troops are fighting in the country than anywhere else in the world, the word Afghanistan has barely been mentioned in the 2016 presidential race by either Democrat Hillary Clinton or Republican Donald Trump. Not a word about the ongoing war appears on the campaign web sites of either candidate.

Whoever takes office in January 2017, however, the prospects for the continuation and escalation of the war are strong. President Barack Obama, having made the war his own with a “surge” that tripled the number of US troops deployed there to 100,000 in 2010, has put the brakes on what had been billed in 2014 as a gradual

drawdown of American forces to the level of “normal embassy presence.”

It is now clear that the corrupt and internally divided Afghan regime will not survive without US military power to prop it up. Moreover, the Pentagon has made clear that it intends to keep permanent bases and thousands of troops in the country, which offer a strategic launching pad for operations in South Asia and the former Soviet republics of energy-rich Central Asia, as well as against both Russia and China.

To these ends, the kind of mass slaughter of civilians seen outside Kunduz on Thursday will continue.



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