

Air strike in Afghanistan kills more than 20 as top US commander calls for more troops

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11 February 2017

Over 20 civilians were reported killed and scores more wounded in a US air strike conducted in the Sangin district of Afghanistan's southern Helmand province Thursday night. Eleven of the victims were reportedly from the same family, whose house was demolished by a missile.

"Last night, US Air Force bombed the house of Haji Fida Mohammad in Chinari village, killing 10 members of the family, including women and children," reported Haji Saifuddin Sanginwal, a tribal elder in Sangin district.

A spokesman for "Resolute Support," the name given to the latest stage of the more than 15-year-old US war in Afghanistan, acknowledged that US warplanes had carried out attacks in the area and said that the American command was "aware of the allegations of civilian casualties" and took them "very seriously."

This latest bloodletting came on the same day that the top US commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, told a Senate panel that "a few thousand" more US troops were needed to sustain what is now by far Washington's longest war.

The US has 8,400 US troops currently deployed in Afghanistan. Italy, Germany, Britain and other countries have some 5,000 troops in the country.

Early in his presidency, Barack Obama launched a "surge" in Afghanistan that brought US troop levels up to 100,000. Afterwards, he pledged to reduce the American presence to a "normal" embassy protection force. In the face of the continuing reversals for the US-backed security forces, however, he scrapped his withdrawal schedule, handing the continuing US war over to Donald Trump.

Asked by the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Arizona Republican John McCain, "In your assessment, are we winning or losing?" Nicholson

replied, "We're in a stalemate." This was the same description provided by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford in testimony last September.

Objective indices, however, suggest that the US and its puppet regime in Kabul are steadily losing ground, while the war's impact on Afghanistan's 33 million people is today more catastrophic than ever.

The Afghan National Army continues to suffer record losses. A quarterly report issued last month by Washington's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) revealed that more than 6,700 Afghan soldiers were killed last year through November 12, exceeding the 6,600 soldiers killed in all of 2015. Combined with continuing high levels of desertion, the US-backed Afghan National Army is growing weaker.

This reality underlay General Nicholson's testimony that the "few thousand" more US troops were needed for training and "advising" Afghan forces. Such an increase would entail the deployment of such "trainers and advisors" more directly in combat. "We have identified the requirement and the desire to advise below the corps level," the US commander told the committee. "It would enable us to thicken our advisory efforts across the Afghanistan mission."

The problem confronted by the US occupation force in previous such efforts has been the proliferation of "insider" or "green on blue" attacks, in which Afghan recruits have turned their guns on their American "advisors."

While the losses suffered by the Afghan National Army are severe, the war's impact upon the civilian population has been even more devastating.

A United Nations report issued this week documented 11,418 civilian casualties in 2016, more than double the number a decade ago and the highest since the UN

began keeping a count of the war's toll. The casualties included 3,500 dead, 923 of whom were children. Another 2,600 children were wounded over the course of the year.

In addition, fighting on the ground combined with air strikes drove at least a half a million Afghans from their homes in 2016—a 40 percent increase over 2015—aggravating a protracted humanitarian crisis and swelling the number of Afghan refugees, whose numbers are second only to those from Syria.

Among the sharpest increases in civilian casualties recorded by the UN's Afghan agency were those stemming from “suicide and complex attacks,” with the Afghan capital of Kabul seeing the greatest number of dead and wounded, reflecting the tenuous grip of the US-backed government of President Ashraf Ghani.

Also driving up the civilian toll was the increased number of airstrikes, with the number of dead and wounded caused by these attacks doubling since 2015. The Obama administration issued the order last summer allowing US commanders to provide greater levels of air support for Afghan forces.

The UN report called for “an immediate halt to the use of airstrikes in civilian-populated areas,” an injunction that the Pentagon is certain to ignore as it would spell the rout of its Afghan puppet security forces.

As it is, according to the SIGAR report issued last month, the share of Afghan districts under government control decreased from 72 percent in November 2015 to 63 percent in August 2016 as a result of the offensive by the Taliban and other anti-government insurgents.

Among the more ominous features of Thursday's Senate hearing were the attempts by both Senator McCain and General Nicholson to implicate Russia in the deteriorating situation for the US in Afghanistan.

McCain accused Moscow of “meddling in Afghanistan in an apparent attempt to prop up the Taliban and undermine the United States.” The US military commander charged that Russia was acting to “legitimize and support” the Taliban, while claiming he could not provide any specific evidence to support this charge in an open hearing.

What has drawn the ire of the Pentagon and sections of the American ruling establishment is the announcement earlier this week by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Afghan counterpart

Salahuddin Rabbani that Moscow will host a meeting later this month bringing together representatives from Afghanistan, China, India, Iran and Pakistan in a bid to resolve the decade-and-a-half-old war. Lavrov added that the Taliban had to be included in any effort to reach a settlement.

The Russian effort threatens to repeat Washington's humiliation in Moscow's brokering—together with Turkey and Iran—of a ceasefire in Syria after the strategic reversal for the US-backed war for regime-change with the government's retaking of eastern Aleppo at the end of last year.

From the outset, US imperialism has aimed at utilizing its intervention in Afghanistan, launched in the name of the “war on terror,” to secure permanent bases that would provide a strategic launching pad for operations in the former Soviet republics of energy-rich Central Asia, in South Asia and against both Russia and China.

While the US ruling establishment has been engaged in a bitter internecine struggle over the incoming Trump administration's apparent tactical shift in relation to Moscow, there is little doubt that Washington will continue to pursue its aggressive aims in Afghanistan.

General Nicholson told the Senate panel that he was confident that the Trump administration would support increases in troop levels requested by the Pentagon. On the same day as the US commander gave his testimony, Trump made his first call since his inauguration to Afghan President Ghani.



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