

More civilians killed by US/NATO forces as fighting intensifies in Afghanistan

By James Cogan
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American and NATO coalition forces in Afghanistan are killing and maiming dozens of civilians as they attempt to suppress a growing anti-occupation insurgency by loyalists of the former Taliban fundamentalist regime. In case after case, the deaths are the result of indiscriminate bombing by US/NATO aircraft in retaliation for attacks on coalition troops.

In the latest incident, residents of a village in the Garmser district of the southern province of Helmand say they were attacked by an air strike on Sunday. A villager, Abdul Qudus, told Associated Press: "They came and bombarded the houses of innocent people. Three houses were completely destroyed. Seven people—including women and children—were killed, and 10 to 15 wounded. We are still searching for five missing people."

The air strike was called in by coalition troops escorting a convoy of 24 supply trucks that had been ambushed by the Taliban. While NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan has not released details, British forces have primary responsibility for the occupation of Helmand province. The day before, a British soldier had been killed and four others wounded in a series of clashes with the Taliban in Garmser. On Monday, another British soldier was killed in Helmand province.

According to Associated Press accounts, Sunday's fighting began after a roadside bomb killed one truck driver and wounded three coalition troops. Over the following 10 hours, Taliban fighters exchanged small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades with the convoy escort. Air strikes were eventually called in to destroy an alleged concentration of Taliban preparing to launch an assault. ISAF reported that at least 24 insurgents were killed.

Rejecting the claim that all those killed were

combatants, Abdul Wahid, another resident from the bombed village, told Associated Press that the fighting along the highway was at least 16 kilometres away. The news agency noted that there "was no way to verify the claims of the coalition or the villagers at the remote battle site".

The deaths in Helmand coincided with confirmation by Afghan officials in the western province of Herat that at least 51 of the 136 "Taliban" that the US military claimed to have killed during operations in late April were civilians, including women and children. Of the others gunned down, some were local villagers with no ties to the Taliban. They had attacked US forces in revenge for the killing of two elderly men during a house raid. According to the Red Cross, US bombing in Herat destroyed or damaged 170 houses and made 2,000 people homeless.

The provincial governor of Helmand has also reported that 21 alleged "militants" who were killed by a US air strike on May 8 in the Sangin district were in fact non-combatants.

US/NATO forces routinely deny such accusations. US Air Force commander Lieutenant General Gary North declared on Sunday that he had "not seen anything" that contradicted the coalition claims to have slaughtered Taliban fighters. The other standard defence is to blame the Taliban for "hiding" among civilians and declare casualties to be unavoidable "collateral damage". A US military spokesman declared on May 24: "We take every precaution to avoid civilian casualties, but understand this is a complex environment, facing an enemy with no regard for civilian life. Unfortunately, civilian losses are sustained."

The UN human rights officer in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, joined in the apologetics for the occupation

forces on Monday, telling the press that whether the people killed were Taliban or not was “difficult to disentangle”. “In some cases, people are said to be Taliban by one side and claimed to be civilians by the other. Many Afghans have weapons in their homes and they may protect their homes. On the other hand, they might be Taliban or other insurgents,” he said.

Among some of Washington’s NATO allies, however, who have deployed troops to Afghanistan despite widespread popular opposition, the indiscriminate manner in which civilians are being killed is raising concern. It undermines their ability to present the conflict as a humanitarian war to help the Afghan people. Anti-occupation hostility is also rising in Afghanistan, causing the insurgency to spread to previously relatively stable areas.

German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung, who this month had to justify the deaths of three German soldiers in a suicide bombing in Kabul, told German television: “We have to do everything to avoid affecting civilians. We are in talks with our American friends about this.” The senior NATO civilian official in Afghanistan, Daan Everts, told Associated Press: “The collateral damage and particularly the civilian casualties are seen as unduly high, certainly by the Afghan people. This is of concern to us.”

According to Human Rights Watch, at least 230 Afghan civilians were killed in US/NATO operations during 2006. Since March 2007, another 135 or more have been slaughtered. This does not include dozens of adult males killed during major NATO operations in southern Afghanistan. All of these were simply passed off as “Taliban”. As many as 1,600 alleged “militants” have been killed since the beginning of the year.

Civilian killings as well as the catastrophic living conditions facing the majority of the population are significant factors fuelling the anti-occupation insurgency, especially in southern Afghanistan where US/NATO military operations have been the most intense since the October 2001 invasion.

According to a survey of 17,000 men in southern Afghanistan by the Senlis Council think tank, 80 percent live in extreme poverty and are not able to adequately feed their families. There has been no adequate food aid in the province of Kandahar—a former Taliban stronghold—since March 2006. Entire villages have been left to starve. The desperation of

population has reached the point where 50 percent of those surveyed believe the poorly armed insurgents will defeat the foreign troops and return to power.

On Sunday, a Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, announced a new counter-offensive to drive out the US/NATO occupation. “In this operation,” Ahmadi declared, “we will target our enemies and use our tactics—suicide bombs, remote-controlled roadside bombs and ambushes—against occupying forces and the government. We start this operation today in all of Afghanistan.” Despite all the killings, the Taliban claims to be able to deploy thousands of fighters.

In US political circles, where there is already considerable alarm over the quagmire in Iraq, concerns about the state of affairs in Afghanistan are increasingly being expressed. Karl Inderfurth, the former Clinton administration assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs, warned yesterday in an opinion piece for the *International Herald Tribune*: “As the death toll of civilians mounts, Afghan hearts and minds are being lost and, with that, the spectre of losing the war looms.”

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