

Pentagon denies responsibility for US massacre of Afghan villagers

By Tom Eley
1 September 2008

As anger mounts in Afghanistan over the August 22 US bombing of a village that killed ninety civilians, the great majority women and children, the Pentagon continues to claim a much smaller death toll comprised largely of “Taliban fighters.” Anonymous US officials, who claim to have investigated the attack in Azizabad in Herat province, insist that 25 Taliban were killed, along with five civilians. The US disavowal contradicts the position of its own Afghanistan stooge regime, the United Nations, which has confirmed the much higher death toll, as well as international media accounts.

An investigation conducted by Afghanistan’s Independent Human Rights Commission counted 91 killed. Fifty-nine of these were children under the age of 15, and 19 were women. Most of the dead were part of one large extended family. The Afghanistan investigation found that there were no Taliban among those killed.

According to the Afghan official in charge of the investigation, Naimatullah Shahrani, “there was not a single armed individual from the opposition in the area.”

The Afghan investigation has been substantiated by a separate UN investigative report authored by Kai Eide, which found “convincing evidence” that about 90 civilians were killed, of whom about 60 were children. “The destruction from aerial bombardment was clearly evident with some seven to eight houses having been totally destroyed and serious damage to many others. Local residents were able to confirm the number of casualties, including names, age and gender of the victims.”

A provincial council member from Herat who visited Azizabad after the raid, Nek Mohammad Ishaq, said he counted 76 corpses of civilians at the local mosque, and more bodies were found among the ruins later. He, like Eide, said investigators were given a detailed list of the identity of each of the dead, including their names, age, and sex. “Some of them were decapitated, some did not have a hand. Each body was photographed,” Ishaq said.

According to an AP report, as Ishaq and “his delegation sat with village elders on the floor of the mosque ... a man walked in holding a handkerchief, which he wanted everyone to see. In it were body parts of children: fingers, bits of hand and feet.”

Residents of Azizabad gathered to protest the attack, and stoned Afghan soldiers who were attempting to distribute relief supplies. “Americans think that all Afghans are terrorists, and they send rockets and missiles against us,” said one resident, Gulbuddin. “I myself buried more than 50 women and children. Are all of them terrorists?”

One survivor of the bombing, Fatima, spoke to the press from her hospital bed. She lost eight family members in the attack. “We were holding a memorial service in our home,” she said as she cried. “Suddenly the infidels attacked and I lost consciousness. When I came to, I was in hospital, and they told me that all of my family were dead and already buried. Was my two-year-old child a terrorist? Then am I not also a terrorist? Why did they let me live?”

In the face of this overwhelming evidence, which evidently includes photos of the dead in the possession of the Afghan government, the US remains obstinate. A Defense Department spokesman, Bryan Whitman, claimed “I don’t have any information that would suggest that our military commanders in Afghanistan don’t believe, still, that this was a legitimate strike on a Taliban target.”

The US has requested a joint investigation with the Afghan government in order to resolve the enormously different accounts of the event; i.e., to compel the Karzai regime to substantially adopt the American conclusion, or at least to drag the investigation on until the incident fades from international scrutiny.

According to the Afghan government, the US military had been manipulated into bombing Azizabad, where a large gathering was underway to mark the eight month anniversary of the death of a clan leader, Timor Shah, was taking place. The Karzai regime has proposed that a rival clan tipped off the Afghan military with the false lead that a gathering of the Taliban was underway in the village. According to an Associated Press story, utilizing the American military to settle personal feuds and business rivalries has been common in Afghanistan since the US invasion.

There is no reason to believe either the Karzai regime or Bush administration accounts as to why the slaughter took place. Karzai is facing mounting anger and social discontent, and fears that the brutality of the American occupiers will ignite a social explosion. The latest US atrocity in Afghanistan has stirred up anger across the country. Given this context, it is convenient for Karzai to attribute the massacre to “false intelligence.” He has responded by both condemning the US attack and firing two Afghan army officers accused of passing on the false lead to the Americans.

In any case, there is a long history of the US bombing any large gathering of Afghans that its satellite-image monitors, stationed in Florida, spot. There have been numerous known instances of deadly bombardments of weddings and funerals, all of which have ended in the exoneration of the American perpetrators.

However, even if the Karzai regime's attempt to explain the cause of the attack would be true, it would in no way lessen US guilt for the atrocity, or Kabul's own complicity. It would only stand as horrible confirmation of the American military's unstated policy of "shoot first, ask questions later." Moreover, such war crimes are inevitable given the military's central task of crushing popular resistance to the occupation.

As for the American military's own account, it cannot be given the slightest credence. In the first place, neither the UN nor the Karzai regime has any interest in exaggerating US depredations. Karzai has only acknowledged the death toll under conditions in which he feels threatened by popular discontent. This is the same perspective of the UN, which fears a debacle for US imperialism should its brutal tactics not be somewhat softened. Eide, the UN investigator, warned that such massacres undermine "the trust and confidence of the Afghan people" in the American invaders.

All the evidence suggests that US claims are utterly bogus. According to an anonymous NATO official, the US assault on Azizabad lasted for several hours, and involved ground troops, gunships, and drones. The battle destroyed or damaged 15 houses. And yet the US military wishes world opinion to believe that *it* was the victim of an attack that resulted in only a single American injury, and that virtually all those who died in the building were "Taliban."

In fact, it is standard operating procedure for the US military to declare all the dead in its rampages to be "Taliban fighters" or "terrorists" or "Al Qaeda." It never produces credible evidence to substantiate these claims, which the US media nonetheless dutifully parrots.

In this case, it appears that those killed may have been friendly to the US. Almost all the dead were members of a clan whose head controlled a company that worked as security for the US at the Shinand airport, located 120 kilometers away. Many of the men in the village also worked at the airport.

The pro-Bush Fox News has played a role in the desperate attempt to hide the true magnitude of the destruction of Azizabad. A Fox "reporter," none other than ex-Lt. Col. Oliver North of Iran-Contra infamy, was embedded with the US unit that pulverized Azizabad. According to North, the confirmed claims of massacred children are a combination of conspiracy and petty graft. "The Taliban and their supporters are running a very effective propaganda campaign to discredit coalition efforts," he suggested in a Fox News report, but incongruously added that "exaggerated claims of damage often result in demands for more money in compensation."

Yet North's account of the "battle" conflicts with that of the military. According to military spokesman Lt. Nathan Perry, "the international forces, along with commando forces from the ANA, ran into an ambush on the way to the area where Mullah Siddiq's men [a supposed Taliban fighter] were gathering, and had to call in an air strike." But according to North, it was the US military that launched the surprise attack: "Though the Marine Special Operations Team had employed a daring deception to achieve surprise, they were heavily engaged by AK-47 and machine gun fire almost immediately after deploying at the objective."

The criminal and reckless US bombardment of Azizabad has

been largely buried by the US media, which has been far more preoccupied with the "disproportionate" Russian response to Georgia's invasion of South Ossetia. They have not pressed the Bush administration to substantiate its claims that stand so patently at odds with reality.

However, the British establishment press has expressed heightened fears in the wake of Azizabad that the US may be on a trajectory to lose the war.

The *Economist* lamented that "if America fails in Afghanistan, as it might, it will be remembered there for killing children" and noting US imperialism's ever-greater reliance on air war: "Ever since it bombed the Taliban from power in 2001, America has relied on air power in Afghanistan to make up for a shortage of troops. As the Taliban and other militants have gained strength, America has dropped more bombs, killing more civilians."

The *Financial Times* pointed to the bind in which the US killing of civilians places Karzai. "The death of civilians is political poison for Mr. Karzai's embattled government," the paper wrote. "His apparent inability to rein in NATO and US forces undermines his credibility as he prepares for next year's re-election campaign."

The BBC also condemned the attack as detrimental to the interests of the occupation: "Killing innocent people by accident in a counter-insurgency campaign is not only tragic, but is hugely detrimental to the objective—to win, not lose, hearts and minds. President Karzai knows how seriously the issue of civilian casualties is taken among Afghan people, and is keen to distance himself from such incidents, which he knows will affect his popularity ahead of next year's election."

The Karzai administration has responded by attempting to publicly distance itself from its American master. The government issued a statement last week calling for the reregulation of the activities of foreign troops in Afghanistan, and demanding that "air strikes on civilian targets, unilateral searches of homes and illegal detentions must be stopped immediately."

But for the US political establishment, Afghanistan remains "the good war." Both Barack Obama and John McCain have promised an escalation of the war in Afghanistan. Obama has consistently criticized the Bush administration for failing to deploy sufficient force there.

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