

Another US massacre in Afghanistan

By James Cogan
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An Afghan government investigation into US air strikes carried out on Monday in the province of Kandahar has found that at least 37 civilians taking part in a wedding celebration were massacred. Another 30 people or more—men, women and children—were injured. The investigation also claimed that 26 insurgents fighting for the former Islamist Taliban regime were killed.

The US attacks devastated the small village of Wocha Bakhta in the district of Shah Wali Kot, some 80 kilometres north of Kandahar city.

According to a US military statement issued on Wednesday, the air strike was called in against a band of Taliban who had occupied the village and fired on a patrol of NATO troops. It alleged that the insurgents used the civilian population as human shields and implied that any casualties could have been caused by insurgent fire.

US spokesman Colonel Greg Julian told journalists: "We acknowledge that some civilians have been injured and some may have been killed. I can't confirm numbers."

An Agence France Presse report based on interviews with villagers and filed on Wednesday presented a very different picture of events. Locals told AFP that as a lunch-time wedding celebration was drawing to a close, insurgents fired on occupation troops from a nearby hill. NATO forces wrongly concluded that the village was the source of the attack and initiated a full-scale assault.

Abdul Jalil, a cousin of the woman getting married, told AFP: "They surrounded the village. From 2 p.m. until 12 at night they kept the village under fire from helicopters, jet fighters and troops on the ground."

The village cleric, Mullah Mohammad Asim, claimed that air strikes had targeted six to seven houses, including the complex where the wedding party was taking place. "They pounded and fired into the village

from afternoon until midnight," he said.

The family of the bride, who was wounded in the attack, was decimated. Her father, Roozbeen Khan, said: "I lost two sons, two grandsons, a nephew, my mother and a cousin... My wounded son was in my arms, right here, bleeding. He died last night." While the groom was not injured, his father, mother and sister were reportedly killed.

Mullah Mohammad Asim described what took place when US ground forces finally entered the village: "At midnight the Americans came and they took the men out of the houses and handcuffed them. But when they saw the death and the destruction, they removed the handcuffs and told us to take the wounded to hospital."

The slaughter of civilians in Afghanistan has become an almost daily occurrence. Without sufficient troops to control the country and desperate to avoid casualties of their own, US and NATO forces rely heavily on air power to combat the growing Taliban insurgency. Air strikes or helicopter gunship attacks are called in against any suspected insurgent concentration. In scores of cases, the alleged "Taliban" have turned out to be villagers attempting to go about their lives amid a foreign occupation and a resistance war. Wedding parties—which often involve celebratory gun fire into the air—have frequently been wrongly assessed as "insurgent activity".

Statistics released by the US military show a huge increase in airstrikes. In all, 13,802 air missions have been flown in Afghanistan and 2,983 bombs were dropped in the first nine months of this year. This breaks down to at least 50 missions and 10 bombings per day—a 31 percent increase over the 10,538 missions flown during the same time period in 2007.

The US-backed Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai is becoming increasingly frantic over the indiscriminate air strikes. The constant reports of civilian deaths have generated enormous hatred of both

the American occupation and the puppet regime. They are a factor in the growing support for the Taliban resistance—especially in the country's ethnic Pashtun southern provinces where the population has suffered the most from US and NATO atrocities.

At a press conference on Wednesday to congratulate Barack Obama on his election victory, Karzai issued an appeal to the president-elect. "My first demand from the US president, when he takes office, would be to end civilian casualties in Afghanistan and take the war to places where there are terrorist nests and training centres," he said.

Any notion that an Obama administration will direct the US military to scale back its operations in Afghanistan is absurd. On the contrary, Obama has centred his foreign policy on an escalation of the Afghan war and an increase in US and NATO troop numbers in the country. During the election, he repeatedly advocated extending the conflict over the border into Pakistan's tribal agencies, which Taliban insurgents have used as a safe haven and base for their resistance to the US-led occupation.

Under the fraudulent banner of finishing the "war on terrorism", Obama intends to ensure that Afghanistan is consolidated as a US client state. His election campaign served as the vehicle for influential sections of the American establishment that consider a high priority should be given to Central Asia—a region where Russia and China are striving for geopolitical dominance.

The Bush administration is now in essence implementing the Obama strategy. Since September, the US military has carried out repeated air strikes inside Pakistan. Additional US combat brigades are being prepared for deployment to Afghanistan. As many as 30,000 extra troops may be sent over the next three to six months. The bipartisan militarist policy is one of the reasons why Bush can speak of a "seamless transition" to an Obama White House.

The figure overseeing the escalation of the Afghan war on behalf of both Bush and Obama is US general David Petraeus, the former commander of US forces in Iraq. Petraeus now heads US Central Command, which has authority over operations throughout the Middle East and Central Asia.

Petraeus visited Pakistan at the beginning of this week for talks with President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani. Both appealed to

him to end the US attacks inside the country which are fueling support for Islamist militants. He responded by authorising another air strike yesterday against a housing complex in the tribal agency of North Waziristan, which killed between 10 and 13 people according to Pakistani sources.

Petraeus is now in Afghanistan, where he is compiling a "strategic review" of US operations that will be presented in the coming weeks to the Bush administration and president-elect Obama. Petraeus arrived in the country as the US military brushed off the Karzai government's complaints over the impact of air strikes. Within hours of Karzai's press conference on Wednesday, a bombing run against an alleged Taliban band in the Afghan province of Badghis reportedly killed seven civilians as well as 13 militants.

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