

US military denies atrocity in Afghanistan's Farah province

By David Walsh
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On Wednesday, the same day another eight Afghan civilians were killed by a NATO-led air strike in Helmand province, the American military released the findings of its interim investigation into the mass killing of civilians in Afghanistan's Farah province May 4.

The investigation concluded that US bombs killed "60 to 65 Taliban extremists" while "at least 20 to 30 civilians may have been killed during the fighting," according to a US Forces Afghanistan news release.

This conclusion, unsubstantiated by any evidence, flies in the face of local accounts, International Red Cross reports and an official Afghan government inquiry that found 140 civilians, including 93 children, died in the US air attack. Only 22 of the victims were adult males. Other sources have put the total death toll higher.

The Afghan government delegation, according to a defense ministry statement, "visited the site of the incident, the graves, assessed intelligence authorities' reports, met with the ulema [religious leaders], elders and locals to complete their investigations."

The US military's whitewash, however, determined that a review of the physical evidence was "inconclusive in determining the exact number of civilian and insurgent casualties." This did not prevent the investigators from minimizing the number of civilian deaths and "strongly" condemning the anti-government forces "for their brutality in deliberately targeting and using civilians as human shields."

This is standard operating procedure. The US military carries out an atrocity, and when initial news reports emerge, denies that it ever took place. When incontrovertible evidence of civilian casualties is presented, the military plays down the number of deaths and blames them, in any case, on the Taliban who "blend into" the population. All of this is done with the cooperation of the US media.

The death toll in Bala Boluk district in Farah province May 4 was the greatest in any single incident in the Afghan war and occupation. It has caused an uproar in Afghanistan, provoking numerous protests. Afghan president Hamid Karzai, a bought and paid for US instrument, was obliged to condemn the attack and declare, "Air strikes are not acceptable."

Even before his government released its report May 16, Karzai dismissed the possibility that the Taliban had caused the civilian casualties. "I got definitive word from the government this morning," he told the media May 9, "that there were more than 100 casualties—nearly 125 to 130 civilians lost. Deaths—children, women and men—and it was done by the [US military] bombings."

A former top official in the Bala Boluk district, Mohammad Nieem Qadderan, commented to the Associated Press May 5, "These houses were full of children and women and elders bombed by planes. People are digging through rubble with shovels and hands. It is very difficult

to say how many were killed because nobody can count the number, it is too early."

While certain details remain unclear, local residents' comments to reporters have established clearly that the US bombed compounds in which civilians, mostly women and children, had gathered for protection from the fighting.

During the day May 4, a unit of insurgents engaged Afghan police and army units, accompanied by US special forces, in the village of Granai in Farah, a large and sparsely populated province on the Iranian border. The Afghan government troops were apparently getting the worst of it and the American forces called in air strikes on at least three targets in the village.

Villagers assert, contrary to the US military's account, that the Taliban fighters had departed by the time the lethal bombings began.

The *New York Times* reports: "There was particular anger among the villagers that the bombing came after, they say, the Taliban had already left at dusk, and the fighting had subsided, so much so that men had gone to evening prayers at 7 p.m. and returned and were sitting down with their families for dinner. ...

"American planes bombed after 8 p.m. in several waves when most of the villagers thought the fighting was over; and whatever the actual number of casualties, it is clear from the villagers' accounts that dozens of women and children were killed after taking cover."

A 12-year-old girl, from her hospital bed where she was recovering from burn wounds, explained to the *Times* reporters that she, her mother and sister, along with other women and children, had taken refuge in a large compound, "which was then hit."

"The bombs were so powerful that people were ripped to shreds. Survivors said they collected only pieces of bodies. Several villagers said that they could not distinguish all of the dead and that they never found some of their relatives. ...

"The enormous explosions left such devastation that villagers struggled to describe it. 'There was someone's legs, someone's shoulders, someone's hands,' said Said Jamal, an old white-bearded man with rheumy eyes, who lost two sons and a daughter. 'The dead were so many.'"

At a May 11 press conference in Kabul one man described how he had lost 20 members of his family in the American attack.

Jessica Barry of the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose aid team provided the first international confirmation of the incident in Farah province, told the media that when the team reached the area, "there were women and there were children killed, it seemed they were trying to shelter in houses when they were hit."

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Barry told journalists May 6 "that there was little doubt that dozens of those killed in two locations

were noncombatants. Many of the bodies seen being pulled from the rubble were those of women, children and elderly men, she said.”

Barry stated on the *Democracy Now!* radio program, also on May 6: “When our team from the ICRC went in on Tuesday afternoon [May 5], they came to two villages, which have clusters of houses around them. They did indeed see dozens of bodies, they saw graves, and they saw burials going on.” A Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousef Ahmadi, insisted that all the dead were civilians.

The US disinformation campaign to cover up the dimensions of the Farah atrocity began almost immediately. Although they undoubtedly knew what had taken place, American military officials pleaded ignorance, claimed an investigation was under way and explained they would know more “once we get eyes on the ground.”

The lack of “eyes on the ground” didn’t prevent the military from issuing a press release May 6 that cast doubt on the civilian death toll. The claims of massive loss of life, “don’t initially appear to add up,” the statement declared.

It went on: “Casualty numbers being reported by the media ‘fluctuate wildly,’ [Army Gen. David D.] McKiernan said, and he raised suspicion that the Taliban are generating negative U.S. publicity to their gain.

“‘It is certainly a technique of the Taliban and other insurgent groups to claim civilian casualties at every event,’ he said. ‘So we just have to do the right investigation on this.’”

A spokeswoman for US forces in Afghanistan May 6 attempted to place the responsibility for whatever had taken place on the Afghan units. “This was not coalition forces. This was Afghan national security forces who called in close air support, a decision that was vetted by the Afghan leadership,” said Capt. Elizabeth Mathias.

On May 7 Defense Secretary Robert Gates explained: “While there have been civilian casualties caused by American and NATO troops, they have been accidental. When the Taliban cause casualties, they are on purpose.”

A day later Colonel Greg Julian, another spokesman for US Forces Afghanistan, called a death toll estimate of 130 put out by the Afghan police “grossly exaggerated,” although he went on to say that “the conclusion from the investigation has not been reached, and it’s inappropriate to indicate one way or another how [the deaths] were caused.”

The following day, the Pentagon floated another story to the effect that the Taliban had forcibly confined villagers in the compounds on which US planes dropped bombs. Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of the US Central Command, asserted on Fox News that “The Taliban moved into these villages seeking to extort money from them ... It appears the Taliban forced the civilians to stay in the houses from which they were engaging our forces.”

US Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James Conway, the top marine officer, had yet another story. He told reporters May 15, that an inquiry would show it was the Taliban who were directly to blame for the civilian deaths in Farah province, not a US air strike. “We believe that there were families who were killed by the Taliban with grenades and rifle fire that were then paraded about and shown as casualties from the air strike. ... Casualty after casualty has said that, in the hospitals, in terms of what they saw and what really took place.”

That same day the Afghan investigative team handed in its official findings, based on interviews with “casualties” and others, revealing that the US air strikes had killed at least 140 civilians. American officials claimed that, “some of the names on the list may be fake” (*Washington Post*).

In the wake of the Farah massacre, various Obama administration officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and newly-appointed ambassador to Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. Karl W. Eikenberry, along with Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Adm. Mike Mullen, expressed hypocritical regrets and promised to cut down on the number of Afghan civilian deaths.

Such atrocities, however, are in the very nature of a colonial war, in which the entire population is seen as suspect and has to be suppressed. There will be other and far worse crimes to come in Afghanistan.

Observers agree, in the words of the *New York Times*, that, “bombings like this one ... have turned many Afghans against the American-backed government and the foreign military presence.” A member of Farah’s provincial council, Belquis Roshan, told a *Time* magazine reporter, “If the situation goes on like this, the whole country will one day become Taliban.” Two days after the incident, *Time* reported, “a mob of several hundred protesters chanted anti-American slogans and threw rocks at the provincial governor’s office” in Farah province.

One of the larger protests was staged by 1,000 students in Kabul May 10. The students, who protested outside Kabul University, blamed the US for the Farah killings and demanded that those who ordered the air raids be placed on trial. A student leader, according to Al Jazeera, read out a statement declaring: “Our people are fed up with Taliban beheadings and suicide bombings. On the other hand, the massacre of civilians by the American forces is a crime that our people will never forget.” The resolution dismissed Washington’s apologies, “You cannot wash [away] the blood of Bala Boluk district martyrs with bizarre words of excuse and sorrow.”

The protesters called the US “the world’s biggest terrorist,” chanting, “Death to America.” A banner read, “The blood of the Farah martyrs will never dry.”

One demonstrator told AFP, “We ask the Afghan government to force the American forces to leave Afghanistan. They kill more civilians than the Taliban.” Haji Nangyalai told the wire service he was demonstrating to “show our anger at the crimes committed by the American forces.”

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