

Rockets kill 12 near Marjah

More civilian deaths as US launches offensive in southern Afghanistan

By Patrick Martin
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In what is likely to be the first of many such atrocities, two US military rockets slammed into a house near Marjah, the target of the current offensive, killing 12 people. US military authorities admitted that the victims were innocent civilians sheltering in their own home, as they had been advised to do by US and NATO officials.

The incident took place as fighting intensified during the second day of the US-led offensive into the town of Marjah and the surrounding district of Nad Ali, in central Helmand province. Some 15,000 troops began the attack early Saturday morning, spearheaded by 5,000 US Marines and including British, Canadian, Danish and Estonian troops, as well as troops of the Afghan puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai.

A Marine unit ordered the rockets fired after coming under effective and well-aimed fire by Taliban guerrilla fighters from two directions. A truck-mounted weapon known as a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) was used, but the two rockets hit a home some 1,000 feet away from the target, US military officials told the press.

There was no explanation for why the rockets were so wide of the mark, but there clearly was an element of recklessness, perhaps even panic, in the action. One military official told the media that the rockets were employed because the heavy ground fire made it impossible for helicopters to evacuate wounded US soldiers. “This is a heavy thing to use under these circumstances but they used something that is usually very precise,” the NATO official told McClatchy News Service. “They probably felt this was better than calling in an air attack.”

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of US forces in Afghanistan, issued an apology to the Afghan government for the death toll, and use of the HIMARS rockets was

temporarily suspended pending a review of the incident.

Despite suggestions from US officials that air strikes on the densely populated farming area would be relatively rare, reporters accompanied the troops who entered Marjah reported frequent detonations from bombs dropped by US jets. In at least one case, US Army troops called in a Cobra attack helicopter that launched a Hellfire missile to destroy a building from which guerrillas were firing and pinning down a US patrol.

A British news agency quoted an American Marine officer comparing the intensity of the firefights to those during the US onslaught on the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004. “In Fallujah, it was just as intense. But there, we started from the north and worked down to the south,” Captain Ryan Sparks told Reuters. “In Marjah, we’re coming in from different locations and working toward the center, so we’re taking fire from all angles.”

Senior US commanders were at pains to downplay comparisons to Fallujah, where the Marines effectively destroyed the city in a week-long battle, inflicting a huge loss of life, because the American propaganda line under Gen. McChrystal has been about capturing the “hearts and minds” of the Afghan people. “We don’t want Fallujah,” McChrystal said in an interview last week. “Fallujah is not the model.”

Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson, commander of the Marines in southern Afghanistan, also disputed the comparison, saying, “The population is not the enemy. The population is the prize—they are why we are going in.” This comment is perhaps unintentionally revealing, conceding that, certainly in Fallujah, as in other operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the local population *was* considered the enemy and subjected to collective punishment.

Prior to admitting to the killing of the 12 civilians in their home, the US military command had acknowledged

27 Afghan dead in the Marjah operations, and characterized all of them as Taliban insurgents. This recalls the practice of the American military in Vietnam, where it became notorious that every Vietnamese victim of US bombs, strafing, artillery and napalm was classified as “Viet Cong.”

Nicholson predicted that intense fighting in the Marjah area could continue, albeit sporadically, for another 30 days. Given the overwhelming control established by the US military in the first two days, this forecast promises weeks of house-to-house raids in which doors will be broken down as US troops and their Afghan collaborators search for alleged insurgents.

The major innovation in the current operation comes in the political goal of establishing a functioning Afghan governmental machine in the area. McChrystal boasted that he would import a “government-in-a-box” to take charge of civil affairs and policing in the Marjah area, including some 2,000 Afghan National Police officers.

The claim that a full-fledged and permanent “Afghan” administration will be established is ludicrous, given the character of the Karzai government in Kabul, an unstable stooge regime entirely dependent on US funds and force of arms.

The claim is further undermined by the name given to the military onslaught, “Operation Moshtarak,” which means “Operation Together” in the Dari language, the derivative of Persian spoken by the large Tajik minority in Afghanistan. The use of a Dari name suggests that most of the Afghan troops participating in the operation are Tajik, former soldiers of the Tajik-based Northern Alliance, which backed the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan.

The population of Helmand province and the Marjah area, however, is Pashto-speaking, like most of the Taliban. Giving a Dari name to the military operation sends a message to the local Pashtun population that they are being conquered by the rival ethnic group, not being integrated into a new “national” Afghan state.

From a military standpoint, the heavily armed US and British troops have overwhelming superiority in both firepower and mobility, demonstrated on Saturday morning when more than a thousand US troops were airlifted into Marjah by helicopters, bypassing the elaborate network of booby traps and IEDs reportedly set up by the insurgents in recent months. The airdropped troops set up 11 secure outposts and effectively took control of the town long before troops moving overland joined them. Only one British and one American soldier

were killed in the first day of the operation.

While as many as 15,000 troops are taking part in the US-led assault, US military estimates of the opposing force ranged from 1,000 to as few as 150. According to a “senior defense official” who spoke to the *Wall Street Journal*, more than 75 percent of the guerrilla fighters in Marjah are local residents, making it easy for them to blend in and return to the fight under more favorable circumstances. The figure also demonstrates that the label “Taliban” is being applied indiscriminately to any Afghan who takes up arms against the foreign occupation force.

The Marjah offensive was immediately trumpeted by Obama administration spokesmen as a major military success. Retired general James Jones, Obama’s national security adviser, told the CNN Sunday interview program, “State of the Union,” that it marked a major change in US strategy.

“Instead of clearing the area and leaving as we frequently did in the past,” he said, “our plans call for clearing the area, holding the area, and then providing some building for the people there, better security, better economic opportunity, better governance, more of an Afghan face. It’s an important moment in time because this is the first time we put together all of the elements of the president’s new strategy.”

According to press reports citing Pentagon and White House sources, the attack on Marjah is a major step in a larger offensive to secure the entire populated region along the Helmand River, extending through the province of that name all the way to Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second-largest city. Some 85 percent of the people of the two provinces live along that corridor, which is the main target of the 30,000 additional US troops ordered into Afghanistan by Obama.

However, as one Afghan official pointed out to the British daily newspaper the *Guardian*, the Nad Ali district, of which Marjah is the center, is only one of the more than 700 districts in the country effectively controlled by the Taliban or under their influence.

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