

US troops attack Afghan bus, killing four and wounding 18

By Keith Jones
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US troops opened fire on a passenger bus travelling on a highway in the Zhari District of Afghanistan's Kandahar Province early Monday morning, killing at least four people, including a woman and a child. Eighteen other passengers were wounded.

This latest shooting of civilians by US occupation forces sparked an angry protest. According to Western news sources, some 200 people blocked the highway near where the shooting occurred. They burned tires, fired guns in the air, and chanted slogans denouncing the US occupation and the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai.

"The Americans are constantly killing our civilians and the government is not demanding an explanation," protester Mohammad Razaq told the Associated Press. "We demand justice from the Karzai government and the punishment of those soldiers responsible."

The AP report went on to quote residents of nearby Kandahar City voicing their anger at US and NATO forces' disregard for civilian life and demanding that they leave Afghanistan. "They say they want to bring security," said Haji Zahir. "It is all lies, lies. They kill Afghans. That is not the way to bring security."

NATO, which refused to identify the nationality of the troops that attacked the bus, issued a statement saying it regretted the deaths, but then went on to justify them. It said that shortly before dawn Monday its troops had opened fire on a "large vehicle" as it approached a "slow-moving" multi-vehicle "ISAF route-clearance patrol."

NATO forces, the statement asserted, had tried to warn off the approaching vehicle "once with a flashlight," "three times with flares," and finally with hand signals, but "these were not heeded." Only after bringing the bus to a halt with one or more volleys of gunfire—a BBC video shows the bus' windows riddled

with bullet holes—did the NATO forces discover that the "large vehicle" was a bus.

Eyewitnesses denied this account, saying the bus was trying to stop when it was raked with gunfire.

NATO forces in the Kandahar region, both US and Canadian, have a long and bloody record of opening fire on any vehicle (truck, car, bus or motorbike) that they deem has come too close for their safety to be guaranteed.

This practice, which simultaneously expresses the arrogance, fear and colonialist character of the occupation force, has resulted in a mounting toll of civilian deaths.

Interviewed from his hospital bed, the driver of the bus, Esmate, told Agence France Presse that his vehicle was between 70 and 100 meters from the NATO convoy when it came under attack. "They opened fire at us," he said "and I fell unconscious. The people who were killed were sitting in the seats just behind me."

Karzai issued a statement that denounced NATO's attack on the bus. "This shooting," said the Afghan president, "involving a civilian bus violates NATO's commitment to safeguard life."

In recent weeks, the Afghan president has repeatedly criticized NATO forces in an attempt to placate mounting popular anger against the US-led occupation forces. He has also been trying to push back at Washington's attempts to limit his power and lay the groundwork, by suggesting his regime is unstable, undemocratic and unreliable, for his possible replacement in a US-orchestrated coup.

Earlier this month, NATO conceded that its forces killed five Afghan civilians in a night raid in Gardez in Paktia Province on February 12. The five dead included three women, one a pregnant mother of 10 children, and another a pregnant mother of six children.

NATO initially claimed its forces had found the five bound, gagged and already dead, but now admits this was a lie.

An Afghan government investigation found that US Special Forces personnel removed bullets from the bodies of the five in an attempt to cover up that they had murdered them. NATO is reportedly now investigating this finding.

The night raids mounted by US Special Forces, frequently in conjunction with Afghan security forces, have become infamous in Afghanistan. A recent report from George Soros' Open Society, titled "Strangers at the Door: Night Raids by International Forces Lose Hearts and Minds of Afghans," warned that their barbarity is fueling support for the insurgency. Afghan compounds are stormed in the middle of the night and their occupants physically abused and their property vandalized. According to a United Nations report, at least 98 civilians were killed in such raids in 2009.

The Kandahar bus atrocity comes as US, Canadian and other NATO forces prepare for a major military offensive in the Kandahar region, long a center of the anti-US insurgency and the birthplace of the Taliban.

At present, much of the province, including the environs of Kandahar City, are effectively under Taliban control, especially when night falls. Speaking at the end of last month, the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, declared the impending Kandahar offensive to be the cornerstone of the US-NATO effort to reverse the growing strength of the insurgency, and thus pivotal for the Obama administration's entire Afghanistan "surge" strategy.

When the current redeployment of US forces to Afghanistan is complete, the US will have almost 100,000 troops in Afghanistan, and the total number of NATO and allied foreign forces will surpass 150,000, a total significantly greater than the number of Red Army personnel deployed to Afghanistan at the height of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Until recently, the counter-insurgency fighting in Kandahar was led by a 3,000-strong Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) contingent. The Canadian troops remain and are expected to play a major role in the coming Kandahar offensive, but they have been joined by many more thousands of US personnel.

For months, Canada's Conservative government has been mounting a campaign of lies and intimidation to

cover up its and the CAF's complicity in the torture of alleged insurgents by Afghan security forces. As part of this campaign, the government prorogued parliament for two months earlier this year. It also sought to tar as a Taliban dupe a Canadian diplomat who testified that the government and military ignored and suppressed his warnings that detainees were being abused.

Richard Colvin further testified that most of those the Canadian military handed over to Afghan security forces for almost certain torture weren't even insurgents, but poor peasants and other toilers who got caught up in CAF sweeps.

An exposé published in Saturday's *Globe and Mail* has yet again given the lie to the government's claims that it long had no reason to believe that Afghan authorities sanctioned torture, and that when it did, it acted to prevent such abuse.

The report reveals that CAF personnel worked hand-in-glove with Brigade 888, a brutal security force under the command of Asadullah Khalid, who was governor of Kandahar Province from 2005 to 2008. The report notes that Canadian soldiers "lived beside" Brigade 888 personnel in the Kandahar governor's palace and "helped to train Afghans who routinely committed torture."

The report says a "Canadian official shrugged off a question" about whether the CAF should have intervened to prevent Brigade 888 from brutalizing prisoners. But the article makes clear that the CAF leadership knew what Brigade 888 was up to, since the Canadian military was bugging Khalid's phone. "The [Canadian] generals knew exactly what was going on," a source told the *Globe*.

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