

Two US troops killed in same Afghanistan valley where massive bomb was dropped

By Bill Van Auken
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Two US special operations troops were killed Wednesday night in a firefight with elements of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) in the Achin district of Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province. A third American soldier was wounded.

The site of the battle was the same valley where the US dropped the GBU-43 Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, the so-called "mother of all bombs," on April 13. The huge conventional weapon is the most destructive bomb dropped anywhere since the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Afghanistan government sources claimed that 40 ISKP militants were killed in the battle and another 13 captured.

The ISKP itself issued a statement that claimed that its fighters had thwarted an attempted US airdrop of Special Forces units into the area. It added that the American operation was accompanied by intensive air strikes and artillery bombardment, which it said killed around 100 civilians, most of them women and children.

Whatever the truth of either side's account of the battle, the fact that such intense combat resulting in US losses was conducted in the same area where the Pentagon dropped its largest nonnuclear bomb raises serious questions about the effectiveness of the weapon and the real purpose pursued with its deployment.

Independent observers have been prevented from reaching the area of the bomb blast by US forces, and the real number of casualties it inflicted, both among the Islamic State militants and civilians, remains unknown.

It is apparent, however, that the dropping of the bomb was meant to serve as a "message" directed not merely to the rather small group of Islamist militants on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, but rather to other targets

of US military escalation, including North Korea, Iran, Russia and China.

The timing of the bombing, one day before Russia hosted a conference in Moscow to discuss an Afghanistan peace settlement—attended by all of the countries of the region, but boycotted by Washington—appears more than coincidental.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, has issued a steady drumbeat of charges that Russia is providing assistance and arms to the Taliban insurgency. US Defense Secretary James Mattis and the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, echoed these charges during Mattis's emergency trip to Kabul on Monday.

Russia has strongly denied providing the Taliban with such aid. Nonetheless, Moscow clearly sees the growth of ISIS, which in Syria includes significant numbers of Islamist volunteers from the Caucasus, as a greater threat in Afghanistan than the Taliban. The two groups have fought each other in eastern Afghanistan.

Mattis's visit to Kabul followed the bloodiest attack by the Taliban against the Afghan National Army since the US invasion in 2001. Taliban fighters, including sympathizers in the military, inflicted massive casualties on Afghan soldiers at a base in the northern provincial capital of Mazar-i-Sharif. TOLONews, Afghanistan's largest television broadcaster, has reported that the number of fatalities has topped 250, while accusing the government of "hiding the truth" about the death toll.

The latest US casualties bring the US death toll in Afghanistan to 2,217, with another 20,000 American troops wounded during nearly 16 years of war. The cost of the war has been estimated at over \$1 trillion.

The war has cost an estimated 200,000 Afghan lives, while turning millions more into refugees. The United

Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) issued its latest casualty report on Thursday, listing 715 civilians killed and another 1,500 wounded during the first three months of this year.

While the overall death toll was very slightly lower than during the same period last year, the figures recorded the deaths of 273 women, a 24 percent increase, and 210 children, a three percent increase.

The main rise in the cause of civilian casualties was from US airstrikes, with 72 dead and 76 wounded. This compares to 29 casualties—eight dead and 21 wounded—in the first quarter of 2016. Undoubtedly, the UNAMA figures underestimate the real toll of the war.

There is every indication that the Pentagon is preparing another major escalation of the Afghanistan war, which under the Obama administration saw a “surge” that brought US troop levels to over 100,000, with no lasting impact in terms of consolidating the rule of the corrupt US puppet regime in Kabul.

Currently there are close to 9,000 US troops deployed in the country, together with several thousand other troops from NATO members, Australia and other countries. Gen. Nicholson, the US Afghanistan commander, indicated in Congressional testimony in February that he needed “a few thousand” more troops to combat the Taliban and other insurgents. He expressed confidence that he would get them.

President Donald Trump has turned over the management of US military operations—and indeed much of US foreign policy—to the cabal of recently retired and active duty generals who hold all the key security posts in the administration, together with the area commanders.

The Pentagon issued a statement Thursday reporting that “The president has delegated authority to the secretary of defense to determine force management levels (FML) for Iraq and Syria.”

The US military has already substantially increased the number of troops deployed in Iraq beyond the official limit of 5,000, using so-called “temporary” deployments to bring the real number to over 7,000. And, while troop levels in Syria had been capped at 500 special operations soldiers, the Pentagon sent several hundred Marines into northeastern Syria to set up an artillery firebase and dispatched a unit of Army Rangers equipped with Stryker combat vehicles to the area of Manbij in a bid to quell combat between the

Turkish military and Kurdish militia fighters who serve as Washington’s main proxy ground troops in combat with ISIS in Syria. In addition, some 2,500 troops from the 82nd Airborne have been sent to Kuwait to serve as a reserve force that can be called into either country.

The Pentagon statement made no mention of Afghanistan, but it is highly probable that the Trump administration will grant the generals similar leeway in terms of escalating the longest war in US history.

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