

US airstrikes kill dozens of Afghan civilians

By Bill Van Auken
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Reports from local officials and Afghan legislators have exposed mass civilian casualties in an offensive carried out last weekend by US and Afghan puppet forces in northern Kunduz province.

Some reports have put the death toll from the bombing raids in the Char Dara district at over 60, with women and children among the victims.

The Pentagon acknowledged that US forces had carried out an operation in Kunduz province, issuing its standard response, asserting that it “takes all allegations of civilian casualties seriously” and is investigating the reports.

The area of the attacks was west of the provincial capital of Kunduz, in a rural district where the Taliban has long maintained control.

According to the *News International*, Pakistan’s largest English language daily, Afghan security forces surrounded the three villages where the air strikes had taken place—Essa Khil, Qatl-e Aam and Uzbek Bazar—preventing relatives from collecting the bodies of their loved ones and interfering with any attempt to discover the precise death toll.

Khosh Mohammad Nasratyar, a provincial council member, gave an estimate of 55 civilians killed, while an Afghan aid worker in the area said the dead numbered at least 40. Others said that more than 60 had died.

President Ashraf Ghani has made no comment on the slaughter in Kunduz. His predecessor, Hamid Karzai, however, strongly condemned the air strikes, demanding an investigation and the prosecution of those responsible. Karzai, who left the presidential palace three years ago, has been strongly critical of the escalating US war in Afghanistan, accusing Washington of wanting to prolong the bloodshed in Afghanistan as a means of pursuing its own strategic interests in the region.

The latest air strikes were among the most intense in

recent months, rattling windows in Kunduz city, which in 2015 was the scene of one of the bloodiest aerial massacres carried out by the US military in the course of its 16-year-old war in Afghanistan. In October of that year, a US AC-130U gunship carried out a protracted attack on a Doctors Without Borders medical center that left 42 dead, 33 missing and 30 wounded amid ghastly scenes of patients burning to death in their hospital beds.

Since US President Donald Trump announced a new Afghanistan strategy in August, ceding to the military brass the authority to set troop levels and guaranteeing the Pentagon “the necessary tools and rules of engagement” to escalate what is now America’s longest war, there has been a marked intensification of the bloodletting that has claimed at least 175,000 Afghan lives and turned millions into refugees.

This has come mainly as a result of intensified air strikes. In its October report on civilian casualties, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported that the number of civilians dying as a result of bombs and missiles dropped on the country from US and Afghan government aircraft had soared by 52 percent during the first nine months of 2017, compared to the same period last year.

The Pentagon is also increasing troop levels in the country, reportedly sending at least 3,000 more soldiers and Marines, bringing the official strength of the US occupation force to roughly 15,000. According to a recently disclosed Pentagon report, the US is now spending some \$3.2 billion a month on the Afghanistan war, with that figure expected to rise along with the ongoing escalation.

The CIA is also reportedly expanding its role in the Afghan war, seeking authorization to initiate its own drone strikes inside Afghanistan—previously it had been restricted to cross-border missile strikes against Pakistan—and to organize “hunt and kill” militias to

carry out assassinations and massacres in Taliban-held areas of the country.

In the midst of the US escalation, a prosecutor for the International Criminal Court (ICC) has formally requested judicial authorization to open an investigation into war crimes carried out in connection with the protracted US war in Afghanistan.

The situation in Afghanistan has been the subject of a “preliminary examination” by the ICC for over a decade, during which countless crimes have been carried out against the Afghan people. Both Washington and its puppet government in Kabul have strongly opposed the court’s moving forward toward any investigation and potential charges.

Among charges that the prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, intends to pursue are that the CIA and the US military, along with the Afghan security forces, engaged in the systematic torture of detainees as a matter of state policy.

A Preliminary Examination Report issued last year charged that the US intelligence agency and the Pentagon “resorted to techniques amounting to the commission of the war crimes of torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity and rape.” It specifically cited the cases of 61 individual detainees subjected to torture on Afghan territory between 2003 and 2014 by the US military, as well as those of 21 detainees of the CIA who were tortured, abused and raped both in Afghanistan and at CIA “black sites” in Poland, Romania and Lithuania.

The ICC prosecutor’s office stressed that these crimes were “not the abuses of a few isolated individuals,” but rather were carried out in pursuit of “US objectives in the conflict in Afghanistan.”

Since its foundation in 2000, the US has refused to participate in the ICC, out of justifiable fear that US civilian and military officials could end up in the dock for crimes carried out by the Pentagon and the CIA in the multiple US wars and interventions waged in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and beyond. Legislation passed in 2002, the American Service Members Protection Act (dubbed the “Hague Invasion Act”), bars any cooperation from Washington on charges brought against US war criminals and authorizes the US president to employ military force to rescue any American military or intelligence personnel detained by ICC prosecutors.

The Obama administration also imposed upon Washington’s Afghan puppet regime a 2014 Status of Forces Agreement that bars any transfer of Americans accused of war crimes to any international tribunal, granting Washington sole jurisdiction over its own personnel operating in Afghanistan.

While Obama defended the CIA torturers who operated under the Bush administration, Trump has publicly declared his support for waterboarding and other forms of torture. While there has been no official US reaction to the ICC prosecutor’s request for authorization to pursue an investigation, it is clear that Washington will do everything it can to suppress such a probe.

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