

Afghan president demands an end to air raids on Taliban amid claims of 130 civilian deaths

US accused of using white phosphorous in raids

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Afghan president Hamid Karzai has called for an end to air raids in his country after scores of civilians were killed in the latest attack on the Taliban.

Karzai, who went on U.S. television to make the call has put the death toll at up to 130 people.

If his figure is confirmed, it would be the biggest such case of Western forces killing civilians since they invaded in 2001.

His spokesman said the Afghan leader was 'very serious' about his demand.

Afghans are furious about the bombing of two villages in Western Farah province during a drawn-out battle last week, when homes full of civilians were hit.

However, his plea was rejected by White House National Security Adviser James Jones, who said the United States could not be expected to fight 'with one hand tied behind our back'.

But an issue that is already poisoning ties between Washington and Kabul may become even more toxic, as Karzai's team showed no signs of backing away from their demand to end attacks which they say undermine the government's legitimacy.

'We demand a complete end to the bombardment of our villages ... and we are very serious about it,' said presidential spokesman Siymak Herawi, when asked about Jones's comments.

'They are like a double-edged weapon with which the international community is hurting itself and also the Afghan people,' he added.

Karzai's warning comes after the U.S. was accused of using white phosphorus bombs during the raids.

Doctors say they found horrific burns on victims of the slaughter a week ago.

They believe they could have been caused by the chemical, which bursts into fierce fire on contact with the air and can stick to flesh and burn deep into it.

While phosphorus can be legitimately used in battle to light up the night sky or create smokescreens, but it is illegal to use it as a weapon.

Human rights groups say its use in populated areas can indiscriminately burn civilians and constitutes a war crime.

Yesterday the U.S. military denied using phosphorus, saying if it had been used, the Taliban were to blame. But that idea was rubbished by experts and denied by the Taliban themselves.

Anger over casualties from aerial bombings has been eroding support for troops on the ground. They accounted for well over half of civilian deaths caused by Western and pro-government forces in 2008, according to the United Nations.

Hundreds of Kabul university students marched on Sunday chanting 'death to America' in protest against the killings.

Army General David Petraeus, who as head of U.S. Central Command oversees military operations in Afghanistan, said he had assigned a brigadier general to look at the use of air strikes.

Petraeus said it was important to ensure 'that our tactical actions don't undermine our strategic goals and objectives'.

Karzai's spokesman Herawi said the raids were not producing a substantial impact on a Taliban insurgency that has been gathering strength across the south and east of the country.

Despite reinforcements to foreign forces, violence has surged to its worst level in the past year, the bloodiest period since U.S.-led troops overthrew the Taliban government in 2001.

'Our houses and villages are not havens for terrorists. The havens of terrorists are on the other side of the border,' he said alluding to neighbouring Pakistan.

'If they want the campaign against terrorism to produce result, then they should pay attention to the nests of terrorism, not to our houses and villages.'

But analysts say U.S. and Nato-led troops would be unlikely to agree to fight without air power, because they are spread relatively thinly across Afghanistan.

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