

Afghan president: US forces killed 16 civilians

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By JASON STRAZIUSO and RAHIM FAIEZ, Associated Press Writers Jason Straziuso And Rahim Faiez, Associated Press Writers

KABUL, Afghanistan – President Hamid Karzai condemned a U.S. operation he said killed 16 Afghan civilians, while hundreds of villagers denounced the American military during an angry demonstration Sunday.

Karzai said the killing of innocent Afghans during U.S. military operations “is strengthening the terrorists.”

He also announced that his Ministry of Defense sent Washington a draft technical agreement that seeks to give Afghanistan more oversight over U.S. military operations. The same letter has also been sent to NATO headquarters.

Karzai in recent weeks has increasingly lashed out at his Western backers over the issue of civilian casualties, even as U.S. politicians and a top NATO official have publicly criticized Karzai for the slow pace of progress here.

The back-and-forth comes as the new administration of President Barack Obama must decide whether to support Karzai as he seeks re-election later this year as part of the United States’ overall Afghan strategy.

Karzai’s latest criticism follows a Saturday raid in Laghman province that the U.S. says killed 15 armed militants, including a woman with an RPG, but that Afghan officials say killed civilians.

Two women and three children were among the 16 dead civilians, Karzai said in a statement.

In Laghman’s capital, hundreds of angry demonstrators denounced the U.S. military Sunday and demanded an end to overnight raids. U.S. military leaders, victims’ relatives and Afghan officials — including two top Karzai advisers — met at the governor’s compound to discuss the issue, Gov. Latifullah Mashal said.

“The U.S. military said ‘We are sorry for this incident and after this we are going to coordinate our operations with Afghan forces,’” Mashal said.

Civilian deaths during U.S. operations have been a huge point of friction between the Afghan government and U.S. and NATO militaries. Many of the deaths happen on overnight raids by U.S. Special Forces who launch operations against specific insurgent leaders.

A U.S. investigative team that had planned to travel to the village — 40 miles (60 kilometers) northeast of the capital, Kabul — was canceled Sunday because of bad weather. U.S. military spokesman Col. Greg Julian said American officials hoped to visit the site on Tuesday, weather permitting.

“We do want to find out what the bottom line is, and we’re kind of in a hands-tied position until we can get out there,” Julian said. “And even when we get out there, it’s based on what people say rather than being able to do a full forensic-type investigation.”

Julian said that the U.S. military has photos showing militants fighting the U.S. coalition forces, but that the photos cannot be released to the public. He said the photos would be shown to Afghan officials.

Karzai last week told parliament that the U.S. and NATO have not heeded his calls to stop airstrikes in civilian areas. Karzai has recently sought to have more control over what kinds of activities U.S. and NATO forces can carry out. According to a copy obtained by The Associated Press last week, the draft technical agreement Karzai’s government sent to Washington and NATO headquarters calls for:

- The deployment of additional U.S. or NATO troops and their location carried out only with Afghan government approval.
- Full coordination between Afghan and NATO defense authorities “at the highest possible level for all phases of military and ground operations.”
- House searches and detention operations to be carried out only by Afghan security forces.

Civilian deaths are an extremely complicated issue in Afghanistan. Afghan villagers have been known to exaggerate civilian death claims in order to receive more compensation from the U.S. military, and officials have said that insurgents sometimes force villagers to make false death claims.

But the U.S. military has also been known to not fully acknowledge when it killed civilians.

After a battle in August in the village of Azizabad, the U.S. military at first said no civilians were killed. A day later it said about five died, and eventually a more thorough U.S. investigation found 33 civilians were killed. The Afghan government and the U.N. said 90 civilians were killed.

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