

US air strike massacres civilians in western Afghanistan

By [James Cogan](#)

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In one of the worst atrocities of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, as many as 90 civilians were massacred by an American air strike last Friday in the western province of Herat. At least 60 of those killed were children under the age of 15, according to Afghan government and military sources.

The slaughter was carried out by what is, for defenceless people on the ground, one of the most terrifying warplanes in the US arsenal, the AC-130 “Spooky” gunship. Equipped with a rapid-fire five-barrel 25mm Gatling gun, a 40mm cannon and a 105mm howitzer, it is designed to lay waste to exposed targets with a torrent of bullets and artillery shells.

The victims were part of a large crowd that had gathered in the village of Azizabad—a community near the government airfield at Shindand, some 120 kilometres south of the city of Herat—for a customary commemoration of the 40th day after the death of a local leader. Many of the men in the village work as security guards at the airfield.

How they came to be targeted by US aircraft is still shrouded in a fog of contradictory reports. According to the US military, an operation was underway against an insurgent group led by a man named Mullah Siddiq. Afghan government troops were allegedly ambushed on their way to intercept Siddiq. They reportedly fought off and then pursued their assailants to Azizabad, where they called in the AC-130 to devastate the village.

The initial reports released by the US military boasted that it had successfully attacked a meeting of Taliban militants in Herat province, killing at least 30. The truth emerged as Herat district officials, Afghan military personnel, aid workers, journalists and, eventually, a senior minister in the government of President Hamid Karzai, visited the scene.

On Friday evening, the Afghan interior ministry issued a statement declaring that “76 people, all civilians and most of them women and children were martyred... 19 women, 7 men and the rest children all under 15 years of age”. Karzai, who has repeatedly protested against indiscriminate US air strikes, issued his own statement, condemning the occupation forces for “martyring at least 70 people, most of them women and children”.

Raouf Ahmedi, a spokesman for the Afghan army, told the *Washington Post* that officials who travelled to Azizabad on Saturday had counted 60 children and 19 women among the dead. “We couldn’t and we haven’t found any identification showing they are Taliban,” he said. An Associated Press cameraman reported that he had seen some 20 destroyed houses and had counted 20 newly dug graves, including some that contained multiple corpses.

People from throughout the district demonstrated on Saturday in Azizabad, carrying a

banner “Death to America”. They reportedly set a police car ablaze and threw stones at government troops attempting to distribute food and clothing to the survivors. Police allegedly fired into the crowd to disperse it, wounding at least eight people.

Ghulam Azrat, the principal of the local school, told Associated Press: “The people were very angry. They told the soldiers ‘We don’t need your food. We don’t need your clothes. We want our children. We want our relatives. Can you give it to us? You cannot, so go away’.”

By Sunday, the death toll from the air strike had been revised upward. Islamic Affairs Minister Nematullah Shahrani told Agence France Presse: “We went to the area and found out that the bombardment was very heavy, lots of houses have been damaged and more than 90 non-combatants, including women, children and elderly people have died. Most are women and children. They [the US military] have claimed that Taliban were there. They must prove it. So far, it is not clear for us why the coalition conducted the air strikes.”

As word of the massacre spread across Afghanistan, Karzai attempted to stem the outpouring of opposition toward the US occupation by sacking the top military commander in western Afghanistan and the commander of the commando unit that called in the air strike. Referring to the false claims that Taliban had been killed, Karzai declared the two had been dismissed for “negligence and concealing facts”.

A spokesman for the Bush administration, Tony Fratto, issued a statement on Sunday that still refused to acknowledge that the US military had slaughtered civilians. Fratto declared: “These reports are being investigated and we’ll look for the results of that investigation.” In words dripping with cynicism, he stated: “Coalition forces take precautions to prevent the loss of civilians, unlike the Taliban and militants who target civilians and place civilians in harms way.”

A press release from US military headquarters in Afghanistan simply noted that it “was aware of allegations that the engagement in Shindand district of Herat province Friday may have resulted in civilian deaths”.

The massacre in Azizabad is only a particularly graphic incident in the frequent killing and maiming of Afghan civilians by American and NATO. Despite the propaganda claims of taking “precautions” and observing stringent rules of engagement, the occupation forces respond to insurgent attacks in populated areas with overwhelming firepower and rely heavily on air strikes to disrupt Taliban movements in rural areas.

As larger areas of Afghanistan fall under the sway of the Taliban, the air strikes become more indiscriminate. Any large group of people moving in the countryside or assembling in a village is treated as suspicious by the targeters who sit in secure bases and scour satellite images for potential targets for the pilots stalking the skies of Afghanistan. Wedding parties have been attacked repeatedly over the past six years—the most recent being the July 6 bombing of a wedding in Nangarhar, in which 47 people were killed, including the bride.

As many as 1,000 civilians have been killed so far this year in Afghanistan, of which close to 400 can be directly attributed to occupation forces. The rest are blamed by the UN on suicide attacks, bombings and other actions carried out by the Taliban.

The true number of civilian fatalities is likely to be far higher. In areas heavily bombed during major US or NATO offensives, some deaths are almost certainly not reported. There

are also good grounds to suspect that some of the several thousand alleged insurgents killed this year were actually non-combatants caught up in the fighting.

Deepening quagmire

The sensitivity of figures like Hamid Karzai stems from their recognition that every report of innocent deaths fuels the general hatred felt by millions of Afghans toward the US-led occupation. Moreover, it heightens the opposition toward the Kabul government, which is widely regarded as a corrupt and ineffective US puppet regime.

With growing popular sympathy and support, the Taliban and other anti-occupation militia based in the ethnic Pashtun tribal border region of Pakistan have re-established influence and control over large swathes of the Pashtun-populated southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan.

Casualties among the occupation forces are climbing as the insurgency intensifies in size and scope. The tally of US and NATO deaths in 2008—currently 194—is already the second-highest annual figure of the war and, based on current trends, will exceed the record 232 deaths last year.

The more poorly-equipped Afghan army and police are taking casualties at a far greater rate. The Interior Ministry reported in early August that 600 police had been killed and over 800 wounded in the preceding four months. There is no comparable figure concerning the casualties suffered by the Army, but the deaths of 10 to 20 Afghan troops are reported most weeks.

Currently, there are 34,000 US troops in Afghanistan, along with 30,000 troops from other NATO countries and US allies. The Afghan Army consists of 65,000 troops but the bulk of its units are incapable of operating without air power, fire support, logistics and intelligence provided by the NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

In response, the Bush administration, with the bipartisan support of the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate Barack Obama, is preparing to deploy an additional 12,000 US combat troops, beginning with a brigade, possibly as early as November. The British government is reportedly preparing to send an additional 4,500 troops, boosting its troop numbers in Afghanistan to over 12,000. Other European powers are being pressured by Washington to send more forces.

Strategic and military analysts are warning, however, that more troops in Afghanistan will not end the armed insurgency if the guerrillas can continue to use Pakistan's tribal region as a safe haven.

The Pakistani government is under pressure from the Bush administration to crack down on these tribal sanctuaries. It has ordered a savage campaign of air strikes against Pashtun villages in the districts of Bajaur and Mohmand. As many as 300,000 tribal people have been forced to flee for their lives. Over the weekend, clashes and bombardments also reportedly took place in South Waziristan—the area believed to be the main base of the Afghan Taliban.

To fully control the border area, however, the Pakistani military would be compelled to deploy tens of thousands of troops into the autonomous Federally Administrated Tribal Agencies (FATA). There is no popular support in Pakistan for such a step. A poll conducted

by Terror Free Tomorrow and cited in *USA Today* on August 22 found that 55 percent of respondents blame the US for the violence in the tribal frontier. Just 6 percent blamed the Islamist militants. In another poll by the International Republican Institute, 71 percent said they opposed Pakistan's cooperation with the US war in Afghanistan.

If the unstable government of Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani orders large-scale troop deployments in the FATA, it will face large-scale unrest as well as possible mutinies in the armed forces.

Anthony Cordesman, an analyst from the Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS), has set out the conclusions that are being widely reached in American ruling circles regarding the Afghan war.

Cordesman wrote in an August 21 report: "The Afghan-Pakistan war is a two-country war that cannot be won in Afghanistan alone. At this point in time, US-NATO/ISAF-Afghan forces are simply too weak to deal with a multi-faceted insurgency with a de-facto sanctuary along the entire Afghan-Pakistan border... It seems likely that the Afghan-Pakistan war will play out over a decade or more, and be a major problem for the entire term of office for the next Presidents of both the US and Pakistan..."

Directly echoing Obama's campaign speeches, Cordesman asserted: "The US and its allies have no choice other than to try and force Pakistan's new government to take a far firmer and aggressive stand... Decisions to take decisive action will be Pakistani, but the US should make it openly clear that the US cannot wait for Pakistan to make such decisions and will have to treat Pakistani territory as a combat zone if Pakistan does not act."

The next US administration, whether headed by Barack Obama or John McCain, appears set to extend US operations in what was once referred to as the "forgotten war" over the border into Pakistan. Friday's massacre in the village of Azizabad is a warning of what happens in areas the US military treats as a "combat zone".

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