

US airstrike kills 18 Afghan civilians

Bill Van Auken
7 June 2012

At least 18 Afghan civilians, including seven children, were killed early Wednesday morning after US special operations troops called in an air strike on their homes.

The massacre provoked an angry demonstration in Pul-i-Alam, the capital of Logar province southeast of Kabul, where the strike took place. Afghanistan's PAN news service reported that residents came to the capital carrying the shattered bodies of the dead, to prove that the victims were civilians.

"The protesters chanted anti-US and anti-Afghan government slogans, saying 'death to America, death to the Afghan government, death to [Afghan President] Hamid Karzai and death to Barack Obama,'" PAN reported.

Security forces opened fire on the protesters, wounding at least one of them.

As is its standard operating procedure, the US-led occupation denied any knowledge of civilian victims, claiming all of the dead were "Taliban insurgents".

"I do not have any reporting that would allow me to confirm civilian deaths," Major Martyn Crighton, a spokesman for the occupation forces said.

The Associated Press, however, reported Wednesday that its photographer in Logar province "saw the bodies of five women, seven children and six men piled in the back of vans that villagers drove to the capital of Logar province to protest the overnight strike."

According to local Afghan officials, US special operations troops were mounting a night raid on a house in the Baraki Barak district in Logar province, when they came under fire. In response, they called in an air strike.

The strike reportedly hit the home of a village elder, Bashir Akhundzada, who was killed in the attack. The Associated Press quoted the head of the local village council as saying that a number of families had gathered at Akhundzada's home Tuesday night for a

wedding party.

"The house is completely destroyed," said the local official. "Everyone is shoveling to try to get the bodies out. Some of the bodies have no legs, no hands."

Two and a half weeks after the NATO summit in Chicago—where President Obama declared that "the Afghan war as we understand it is over"—violence in Afghanistan continues to escalate and the death toll continues to mount.

In Ghazni province, south of Logar, troops of the US 82nd Airborne are carrying out a major offensive in what has long been a stronghold of the armed opposition groups, as well as a route for men and supplies joining the fight from Pakistan. The Pentagon has billed the operation as the last major offensive in which massed American troops will be "clearing" villages, going house-to-house in a bid to drive out resistance forces.

An armed US helicopter went down over Ghazni province on Wednesday, killing two American pilots. "It is likely that the helo today was brought down due to enemy small arms and RPG fire," a Pentagon official told CNN.

The 82nd Airborne units fighting in Ghazni are scheduled to leave Afghanistan in September, as the US military completes the drawdown of the troops sent there in the "surge" ordered by Obama in December 2009.

That drawdown will leave approximately 68,000 American troops in Afghanistan after September. While a formal deadline set by NATO calls for completing the withdrawal of all "combat forces" from Afghanistan by 2014, a "strategic partnership" deal signed by Obama and Karzai in Kabul at the beginning of last month sets the stage for a continued occupation of the country by what is projected to be at least 20,000 US troops, including large contingents of special operations forces. The US will maintain its control over air power in the

country and, through the deployment of “trainers” and “advisors”, will direct the operations of the Afghan security forces.

The type of operation carried out in Logar province, involving Special Forces night raids and air strikes, will continue well past 2014 under the plans drafted by the Obama administration and the Pentagon. These operations are hated by the Afghan people and have prompted impotent protests by Karzai, who has publicly demanded that US military forces stop operations in Afghan villages and end air strikes that kill civilians. In reality, however, Karzai’s puppet regime, widely hated by the Afghan people, remains dependent upon US firepower to keep him in the presidential palace.

Washington is also escalating its military violence across the border in Pakistan, with eight drone strikes carried out against targets there over the past two weeks. Pakistan’s foreign ministry called in a senior US diplomat Tuesday following a drone strike the day before that killed at least 15 people in the northwestern frontier tribal region of North Waziristan. It was the third such strike in as many days, which together claimed 27 lives.

A statement issued by the Pakistani ministry called the drone strikes “unlawful, against international law, and a violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty”.

Rebuffing the Pakistani protest, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta declared Wednesday that the drone strikes are “about our sovereignty as well”. He claimed that the US is “fighting a war in the FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas]” and is justified in doing so, “because there were a group of individuals who attacked us on 9/11 and killed 3,000 of our citizens.”

While Panetta invokes September 11 as the pretext for Washington’s drone war in Pakistan, the majority of the missile strikes from the pilotless aircraft are directed at individuals suspected not of terrorist plots against the United States, but of resisting the more than decade-old US military occupation of Afghanistan.

The provocative character of Panetta’s comments were magnified by the fact that he delivered them from New Delhi, Pakistan’s historic rival in south Asia, where he also urged greater involvement of India in Afghanistan, a prospect seen by Islamabad as a direct threat to Pakistan’s strategic position in the region.

Demonstratively identifying US interests with those of India, Panetta said: “Just as India views the relationship with Pakistan as complicated, so we do. It is a complicated relationship, often times frustrating, often times difficult.”

Relations between Washington and Islamabad have been marked by tension, particularly since US air strikes on Pakistani posts on the Afghan border last November that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. In retaliation, Islamabad closed the routes from the port of Karachi to the Afghan border upon which the US-led occupation force depended for at least a third of its supplies.

On Monday, the Pentagon announced that it had reached deals with the former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, allowing US troops and equipment to use their territory to enter and leave Afghanistan. This so-called Northern Distribution Network is considerably longer and more expensive than the route through Pakistan, but it appears Washington is turning to it as part of preparations for a protracted and intensifying military intervention in the South Asian country.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact