

As Obama touts end of Afghan war, US strike kills 10 civilians

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A US airstrike in eastern Afghanistan Wednesday killed 10 civilians, including five children. The deadly attack came just hours after the State of the Union speech in which President Barack Obama falsely claimed that the more than decade-long US war and occupation in Afghanistan “will be over” by the end of next year.

Afghanistan’s Pajhwok Afghan News agency (PAN) reported that the civilian victims of the strike included five children, four women and one man. The overnight raid targeted two houses in the village of Chawgam in the Shigal district of Kunar province. Four other civilians were wounded.

The civilian victims, referred to by the US military as “collateral damage,” far outnumbered the three Taliban fighters said to have been killed in the bombing.

PAN reported that provincial council chief Haji Mia Hassan Adil denounced the raid. “Such military actions were widening the gap between the people and the government,” it quoted him as saying.

The spokesman for the US-led occupation force issued its stock response, claiming to have no information about the killing of women and children, but insisting that it “takes all allegations of civilian casualties seriously.”

The bombing in Kunar province was only the latest, and bloodiest, in a series of incidents in which US forces have killed Afghan civilians.

On Tuesday, dozens of people from the Aab Ban district in southern Ghazni province blockaded the Kabul-Kandahar highway in protest over what they said was an overnight raid in which US special operations troops killed two civilians and wounded at least two others. The protesters said that those killed and wounded all belonged to the same family. They said they would not stop blocking the busy highway until two others detained by US forces were released.

Last week, authorities in Afghanistan’s western province of Herat charged that five civilians, two women and three children, were slain in a night raid by US special forces.

Obama claimed in his speech Tuesday night that “by the end of next year, our war in Afghanistan will be over.” The reality is that these kinds of killings of Afghan civilians in US air strikes and special operations night raids are set to continue into the indefinite future.

Obama used his speech to spell out a somewhat more precise timetable for drawing down

US troops from Afghanistan. He said that 34,000 American soldiers and Marines—roughly half of the force now deployed there—will be withdrawn within the next year. He further claimed that by “this spring” US forces “will move into a support role, while Afghan security forces take the lead.”

This withdrawal will bring the number of US troops in Afghanistan back to the level that existed before Obama took office. Proclaiming the intervention there a “war of necessity,” he tripled the size of the American occupation force.

Obama’s decision on the pace and size of the withdrawal is in line with what had been requested by the Pentagon. The plan, the New York Times reported Wednesday, is designed to “give the military commanders in Afghanistan flexibility in determining the pace of the reductions and will enable them to retain a substantial force until after the next fighting season, which ends in October.”

According to the Times, the White House asked the recently replaced US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Allen, to submit three options on troop levels, and then, according to unnamed administration officials, “essentially endorsed the general’s preferred option.”

This will keep troop levels at over 60,000 until the end of October, reduce them to 52,000 by the end of November, and finally reach the figure of 32,000 by February of next year.

The approval of the general’s proposal, according to officials cited by the Times, “rebuffs arguments” put forward by Vice President Joseph Biden and others for a more rapid troop drawdown.

Neither this schedule nor Obama’s speech, however, addressed the composition of the troops that will remain in place or what further withdrawals will take place after next year.

At the core of the remaining force, a so-called “counterterrorism” task force of special operations troops and American air power will stay in Afghanistan well after the date when Obama claims the war will have ended. These are the military elements responsible for the lion’s share of civilian casualties inflicted by the US-led occupation.

In his State of the Union address, Obama reiterated that Washington intends to maintain a military force in Afghanistan well past the formal date for the US-NATO withdrawal at the end of 2014. He said that US forces would continue “two missions: training and equipping Afghan forces, so that the country does not again slip into chaos, and counterterrorism efforts that allow us to pursue Al Qaeda and their affiliates.”

He gave no indication what the troop numbers would be after 2014. While earlier this year there were reports that as many as 20,000 troops could be involved, most estimates now suggest that no more than 9,000 will remain.

Washington is still engaged in negotiations with the Karzai regime on a status of forces agreement governing the operations of US forces in Afghanistan after 2014. Failure in Iraq to reach such a deal, and, in particular, to secure immunity for US troops for crimes carried out against the Iraqi people, scuttled plans of both the Bush and Obama administrations to keep a residual American military force in that country.

The US is determined to avoid such an outcome in Afghanistan. Whatever the precise

configuration of the force that will remain there, Washington wants to maintain a military foothold in South-Central Asia as a means of asserting its interests in the oil-rich Caspian Basin and placing military pressure on neighboring China.

The Washington Post reports that among the options under consideration for post-2014 US operations in Afghanistan is a plan to reduce the size of the US presence to as little as 2,500 troops. This proposal, however, would include basing US special operations troops outside of Afghanistan but in a position to “swoop into the country from ships or bases in nearby nations to conduct counterterrorism missions, operating from facilities run jointly with Afghan forces.”

While senior US military commanders have backed the deployment of a larger residual force, according to the Post, even in the Pentagon many are “skeptical that a few thousand more US troops would be able to help transform the much-troubled Afghan army into an effective fighting force.”

In this sense, the withdrawal plan is an admission that the so-called “surge” ordered by Obama at the end of 2009 has been a failure. Its purpose was not, as the Democratic president claimed, to counter a threat from Al Qaeda, whose presence within Afghanistan was already negligible, but rather to stabilize the corrupt government of Hamid Karzai, which Washington installed after its 2001 invasion of the country, and defeat a spreading insurgency.

Attempts to field Afghan security forces capable of taking over from the US-led occupation force have been hobbled by a 24 percent desertion rate among these forces, together with the persistent problem of so-called “green-on-blue” attacks, in which Afghan soldiers and police turn their guns on their American and NATO trainers.

The nature of the US-backed government itself—and why it is so widely hated—has been underscored by two recent reports. The first, prepared by the United Nations, found that half of all Afghans had been compelled to pay a bribe to government officials over the course of the previous year. It concluded that the cost of this corruption, approaching \$4 billion, is greater than all the revenues collected by the regime in Kabul to fund public services.

The second report, conducted by an Afghan panel following up on a UN report, confirmed that half of all Afghan prisoners are tortured and the practice is on the rise.

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