

NATO Airstrikes: Stench of Death Hangs over Afghan Riverbank

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The stench of burnt flesh hung over the banks of the Kunduz river in the early hours of Friday, the ground scattered with the body parts of villagers who just wanted something for free.

Helping yourself to the spoils of hijacked military convoys is nothing new in Afghanistan and the payload of two fuel tankers destined for Nato-led forces seemed as good as any.

But the overnight bonanza soon turned to horror when Nato jets launched an airstrike before 3am (22.30GMT), strafing the tankers and igniting an inferno that officials said killed between 50 and 90 people.

“Nobody was in one piece. Hands, legs and body parts were scattered everywhere. Those who were away from the fuel tanker were badly burnt,” said 32-year-old Mohammad Daud, depicting a scene from hell.

The burned-out shells of the tankers, still smoking in marooned wrecks on the riverbank, were surrounded by the charred-meat remains of villagers from Chahar Dara district in Kunduz province, near the Tajik border.

Dr Farid Rahid, a spokesperson in Kabul for the ministry of health, said up to 250 villagers had been near the tankers when the airstrike was called in.

Officials said about 55 Taliban were killed and more than 10 wounded, but witness accounts of civilian deaths are yet to be officially confirmed.

Witnesses told Agence France-Presse that villagers, including children, gathered around one of the tankers that had stalled in the shallows of the river to help themselves to fuel.

Taliban insurgents hijacked the trucks late Thursday, the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) under Nato said, and were trying to drive them across the river when one got bogged down.

Witnesses said the insurgents called on villagers living nearby to help themselves to the fuel — probably to lighten the load and make the stranded truck easier to move.

“Villagers rushed to the fuel tanker with any available container that they had, including water buckets and pots for cooking oil,” said Daud.

Some farmers even brought their tractors to fill up, he said, and as they did, 10 to 15 Taliban gunmen stood on top of the tanker watching the free-for-all.

“This was when they were bombed,” Daud said. “Everyone around the fuel tanker died.”

Shoes, an AK-47 rifle, swatches of burned clothing, the carcass of a donkey with a woven saddle cloth still tied across its flanks, yellow plastic jerry cans with red screwtops — all lay scattered across the pebbled banks.

Turbaned men, one holding a GI doll in a blue uniform, and Afghan security forces in desert boots and green berets strode around the tankers as dawn segued into a blue-sky day.

At a funeral ceremony, village men and boys stood silent along the edge of a mass grave as a tractor opposite shoved earth over the shrouded bodies below.

And at a hospital in Kunduz city, the provincial capital, the wounded were brought in on carpet-covered stretchers, their skin burned away from red-raw wounds, many too dazed and in too much pain to even cry, witnesses said.

Around eight bodies were in a terrible condition — the skin burnt black and peeling off to expose raw red muscle. Others arrived with their clothes burnt on to their skin.

The hospital was filled with the smell of burnt flesh, with even the corridors occupied by the wounded, said an Agence France-Presse reporter. — AFP

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