

NATO continues slaughter of civilians in Afghanistan

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Twice in a matter of a few hours on Wednesday, the NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) occupying Afghanistan fired missiles into civilian dwellings, killing as many as 26 men, women and children. The deaths underscore the fact that ISAF's counter-insurgency operations are being conducted with murderous disregard for the local population, which is overwhelmingly hostile to foreign military forces.

The first incident took place in the Zhari district of Kandahar province, where the Canadian military alleges its troops killed between 500 and 1,500 Taliban guerillas during August and September, in an offensive codenamed Medusa.

According to an Associated Press account, NATO helicopters fired missiles into three homes in the village of Ashogho at 2 am. Residents claim that 13 people, including four women, were killed and 15 others were injured. Kandahar governor Asadullah Khalid told the media there was no evidence that Taliban fighters were among the dead, or even in the village at the time.

Several hours later, rockets ripped into a house in Gereshk, a town in Helmand province. British troops make up the bulk of the NATO forces in Helmand, where they have been engaged in months of savage fighting with local resistance fighters.

A neighbour of the destroyed house told Associated Press that 13 civilians—three men, five women and five children—were killed and the attack came from an aircraft. Afghan police reportedly called for NATO air support during a clash with alleged Taliban militants on the town's outskirts. Jet fighters and helicopters fired missiles and dropped bombs.

The aircraft have not been identified in either incident. But they were most likely from the US or Britain, which provide the bulk of NATO's airpower in Afghanistan.

An ISAF press statement on Wednesday admitted responsibility for the civilian deaths in Kandahar. It declared operations were taking place in the area "to detain individuals" involved in planting roadside bombs against the occupation forces in the neighbouring Panjwaii district. "Close air support was used" and "caused several civilian casualties".

The ISAF did not explain why capturing insurgents involved firing missiles into houses. It is, however, standard operating procedure. As soon as any resistance is encountered or even suspected, American and NATO forces call in air strikes, regardless of the potential for civilian casualties.

Hundreds of Afghans have been slaughtered in such atrocities. One of the most criminal occurred in May, when US A-10 aircraft strafed and bombed the Kandahar village of Azizi,

massacring at least 80 people.

The extent of civilian deaths is usually concealed by NATO allegations that the victims are insurgents. Villagers from the Kandahar area targeted during Operation Medusa claim dozens of locals were included in NATO's body count of dead "Taliban". A farmer, Toon Jaan, told the Canadian Press agency last month that 26 members of his extended family were killed during the Canadian military's bombardment of the village of Sperwan.

These indiscriminate killings are a significant factor in encouraging Afghans to take up arms against the occupation. The ranks of the insurgency are continuing to expand despite the tremendous casualties the poorly equipped Afghan guerillas suffer in any direct engagement with NATO troops.

Just one month ago, the commanders of Operation Medusa boasted they had routed the Taliban from Zhari and Panjwai districts and enjoyed strong local support. ISAF troops, they declared, were supporting relief and reconstruction efforts that would "provide much needed assistance to those displaced by the recent Taliban occupation".

On September 25, the NATO ambassador in Kabul, Daan Everts, hailed the ISAF's success as "evidence of our commitment to deliver practical help to the people of Afghanistan, and a stark contrast to the insurgents who are dedicated to destruction, while we help rebuild lives and homes".

Now, ISAF forces in the region are again coming under attack from locally-based insurgents and responding with indiscriminate air strikes that take lives, destroy homes and further alienate the Afghan people.

A villager from Ashogho in Kandahar told Associated Press on Wednesday: "If the foreign soldiers were so smart that they knew there were Taliban here, why didn't they see the women and children who were sleeping? Why do they want to kill us? How can they help us rebuild if they want to kill us. Maybe they should leave."

In Helmand province, a suicide bomber has already retaliated for the attack on Tajikai village. On Thursday, a man rushed into the middle of a convoy of British vehicles in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah and detonated a large explosive. One British marine was killed and another seriously wounded. The death toll this year of US and allied troops is already 172—the highest for any year since the 2001 invasion.

The other major factor in the ongoing resistance is resentment over the social divide between ordinary Afghans and the political elite who have grown wealthy through their collaboration with the US-led occupation.

Mohammed Siddique, an official for the charity Afghans for Tomorrow, told the press this week: "Why doesn't the government help the poor? Why do the government people and the commanders build big mansions, and poor people still live in bad conditions? Why, when all this money is coming into Afghanistan from foreign countries, are people's lives so miserable? People say the Taliban are bad, but people also say these people in government are bad."

Such is the strength of the opposition that a senior British officer who has just returned from Afghanistan, Brigadier Ed Butler, warned this week that the insurgency could last another "20 years". Butler declared: "I think some may have underestimated the tenacity and

ferocity of the Taliban.”

The immediate answer of the Bush administration and the governments supporting its neo-colonial occupation is greater force and violence. The US, Britain and Canada are intensifying pressure on the main European powers, such as Germany, France, Italy and Spain, to send troops to assist in the repression of the Afghan people. More than a month after the most senior NATO commander made an urgent appeal for 2,500 reinforcements, however, none have been sent.

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