

US Killings of Innocent Civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan

A Pakistani Viewpoint

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Civilian casualties have been a foremost concern in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the presence of US-led NATO forces in Afghanistan. To target the Taliban, US-led NATO forces are continuously slaughtering innocent civilians in the name of so-called Global War on Terror (GWoT) by air strikes and drone attacks.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was formed to help out the Afghan Transitional Administration and the first post-Taliban elected government to counter the Taliban insurgency. It was not intended for civilian killings.

The U.S and NATO led ISAF besides having highly sensitive technology and sophisticated spying systems are unable to differentiate and mark actual targets for which they have been spending huge amounts of money. Careless and unverified attacks caused innocent killings instead of actual targets. To kill few suspects killing of hundreds of innocents cannot be justified.

Pathetically, after more than ten years of continuous war and spending trillions of dollars, U.S and its allied forces did not realize that show of power is not the only solution to resolve the issues. Indeed the presence of foreign forces has created a complex situation in Afghanistan, as well as in Pakistan. In the presence of large number of US- led NATO forces, the suicide attacks, bombing and terrorist attacks are routine in both countries.

The United Nations reported that in the year of 2011 the civilian death toll in Afghanistan was 3,021 and 4,507 Afghans were wounded. According to other sources the actual number of civilian casualties was probably five times as large as the number that the UN mentioned. In February 2012 the annual report on 'Protection of civilians in armed conflict' prepared by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), acknowledged that 3,021 civilian deaths last year is an increase of eight percent than the previous year's total of 2,790. Jan Kubis, the head of UNAMA said that "for much too long, Afghan civilians have paid the highest price of war. Parties to the conflict must greatly increase their efforts to protect civilians to prevent yet another increase in civilian deaths and injuries in 2012." He also stated that according to U.N. figures, "the Taliban and their allies were responsible for 79 percent of civilian casualties, Afghan and NATO led ISAF 9 percent, but it was not clear who was responsible for the remaining 12 percent of the casualties".

These target killings of NATO-led ISAF are total violation of the UN Charter. The Geneva

Convention clearly mentions that “Civilians shall not be the object of attack”. No one should be above the law but who has to justify? It has been easy to pass blame for NATO-led forces killings on the Taliban and others while civilian death toll is rising. Putting the responsibility of these casualties upon anti-government activists, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and suicidal attacks by Taliban, which is an easy way to get rid of the blame of killing innocent civilians.

Pakistan has constantly protested against drone attacks. These attacks breach Pakistan’s sovereignty. As drone attacks also cause civilian killings, including women and children, which adds anger to the Pakistani government and people. More than 35,000 civilians have died in suicide bombings in Pakistan since 2001. Although these suicide attacks seem having no direct involvement of the U.S or allied troops but this happened in response of GWoT operations against the Taliban in North Waziristan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan has suffered approx more than seventy billion dollars loss in this GWoT including precious lives of soldiers and civilians. Recently UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said “Drone attacks do raise serious questions about compliance with international law, and called for a UN investigation into US drone strikes in Pakistan, questioning their legality and saying they kill innocent civilians”.

Brutal killings of defenceless civilians, by air strikes, and drone attacks only been responding through an ‘apology’ by NATO. Apologies for civilian deaths cannot be enough because there is no justification of innocent killings, not at all. No apology can return a life. If apology does compensate a human life then why GWoT was initiated, United States could ask terrorists of 9/11 for formal apology to compensate the loss. Life value of an Afghan or Pakistani is equally important as any American’s or European’s life. But international law, and international community were paying no attention and maintaining silence even NATO’s bombing killed thousands of innocent men, women and children from Yugoslavia, to Iraq, from Afghanistan to Libya and in Pakistan as well.

US is fighting a war far away from its homeland. From the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Iraq and then Afghanistan and Pakistan, US never fought a war on its own land that’s why people of U.S are living in a peaceful environment without any fear of air strike, bombing, night raids and drone attack; they do not realize the fear of war. While innocent people of Afghanistan and Pakistan are paying for a sin which they haven’t committed. In fact these innocent casualties are becoming the cause of terror for civilians. Article 51/2 of Geneva Convention ‘Protection of the Civilian Population’ states: “The civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attack. Acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population are prohibited”.

Civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan are in a constant threat and uncertainty. Their future generations are growing in a pathetic environment where no American or Western would like to raise his children.

These incidents are spoiling the immature minds of young generation of both countries which could certainly turn into an unthinkable disaster. The killing of innocent people is an alarming situation, its increasing hatred for US, NATO and ISAF Forces and equally for local forces of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Reason of uncertainty and internal instability in Pakistan is the presence of US-led NATO forces in Afghanistan. Total withdrawal of US-led NATO forces from Afghanistan is the only

solution to bring peace and stability in the region. It has been observed that after the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, graph of violence and killing of civilians dropped dramatically. It is believed that withdrawal of US-led NATO forces from Afghanistan will bring peace and stability in the region.

The US should immediately stop air strikes, night raids, and drone attacks in both countries. Government of Pakistan should remain firm against drone attacks. On December 9, 2011, Pakistan's Army Chief Ashfaq Parvez Kayani issued a directive to shoot down US drones.

A senior Pakistani military official said, "Any object entering into our air space, including U.S. drones will be treated as hostile and will be shot down". Statements were issued but it never happened. Therefore U.S continued drone attacks with out any difficulty. Government of Pakistan should practically show their will to stop drone attacks.

Recently US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said that 'Washington was reaching the limits of its patience with Islamabad because of the safe havens the country offered to insurgents in neighbouring Afghanistan'. Its astonishing that in the presence of 90,000 US troops along with the eastern border of Afghanistan (along with Pakistan), equipped with state-of-the-art weapons, air support, sufficient trained manpower and also claims the hold of the terrain, insurgents safely cross the border of Afghanistan, attack and then escape inspite of US knowing their "safe heavens" in Pakistan. Even with the drone attacks which US claims highly precise targeting and sophisticated spying systems they kill innocent people instead of their claimed high profile targets. US is not satisfied and pushing Pakistan to 'do more' again and again.

Asian region has four nuclear weapon states which increases its importance as well as concerns for US-led western states. So regional co-operation and support among the Asian states will enhance the regional strength and also help to eliminate any foreign influence in the region again.

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