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Reuter

Afghan campaign caused \$100 million damage: inquiry

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Afghan and foreign forces have caused more than \$100 million damage to fruit crops and homes during security operations in southern Kandahar province, a government delegation said on Tuesday.

Tens of thousands of foreign and Afghan troops are deployed in Kandahar, a traditional stronghold of the Afghan Taliban, where they have been conducting military offensives over the past year.

Violence is at its worst since U.S.-backed Afghan forces overthrew the Islamist government in 2001 after it refused to hand over al Qaeda militants, including Osama bin Laden, after the September 11 attacks on the United States.

The government delegation, led by President Hamid Karzai's adviser, Mohammad Sadiq Aziz, said Afghan and foreign forces caused unreasonable damage to homes and orchards, just as the harvest was about to begin, and displaced a number of people.

ISAF was not immediately available for comment on the report by the government delegation, which presented its findings to Karzai on Tuesday.

"The Omid (Hope) military operation, which has been going on for some time in Arghandab, Zhari, and Panjwai districts, has inflicted severe damage to the people," Aziz said in a statement released by Karzai's office.

Aziz said several Afghans detained by foreign troops during the operation had been released after requests were made by the government delegation.

But Zalmay Ayoubi, spokesman for the governor of Kandahar, said the Taliban booby-trapped the orchards and empty houses of people who had fled ahead of security operations and that troops had no choice but to blow up those sites.

He said the claims by the villagers about the cost of the damages were highly exaggerated.

In November, the Afghan Rights Monitor (ARM), a human rights group, reported widespread damage to hundreds of houses in the same three districts, home to about 300,000 of the province's more than one million inhabitants.

It said foreign forces had used aerial bombing to strike Taliban strongholds and to set off mines and homemade bombs sometimes hidden as booby traps in private homes.