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Civilians or Taliban Insurgents?

By Jean MacKenzie

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The latest account of mass casualties in Afghanistan is certain to inflame anti-foreign sentiment, no matter what the military's final report might say.



A relative mourns near the damage, caused during a NATO's forces raid in Khogyani district of Nangarhar province.

Over the weekend came the news that up to 50 civilians had been killed in NATO airstrikes in a remote area of Kunar province. The provincial police chief confirmed the figure, as did the provincial governor. President Hamid Karzai is furious.

The dead included 29 children and 20 women, according to local sources.

Nothing undermines the international effort in Afghanistan as much as civilian casualties – non-combatants erroneously targeted or accidentally killed by U.S. or NATO forces. It is difficult to convince a village that the troops are there to help when they have just flattened everything for a kilometer around.

NATO has promised to investigate in Kunar, issuing the usual verbiage about “taking all reports of civilian casualties very seriously.”

But the military has already started circulating its own version, telling the media that they had picked up radio chatter in which the Taliban said they were planning to release false reports of civilian casualties. The military’s own battle videos, they say, indicate that 30 to 35 insurgents were killed, with no evidence that there were civilians in the area. They deem the operation “successful.”



A boy, injured during a NATO air strike, lies on a hospital bed in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar province February 20, 2011. Joint operations by Afghan forces and NATO-led foreign troops killed 64 civilians in Kunar, including many women and children, over the past four days Reuters

At this point there is no way of knowing the truth – the area is so unstable that even local Afghan officials have been unable to get in to make an independent assessment.

Two journalists from Al Jazeera were detained by the U.S. military in Kunar on Monday, supposedly for lacking proper credentials. The NATO media office could not confirm whether the pair had been investigating the alleged casualties.

For those of us who have been in Afghanistan for a while, the incident raises some unpleasant associations. This has happened before, on numerous occasions.

In 2008, in a small village called Azizabad, in western Herat province, NATO airstrikes killed between 78 and 92 civilians, according to the United Nations, the Afghan government, and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, all of which conducted separate investigations.

But NATO flatly denied the allegations, which they called “Taliban propaganda.”

It took over a month for a U.S. military report to reveal that up to 33 civilians had been killed in Azizabad. They still dismiss any higher figures.

I have some personal experience of the military’s hair-trigger sensitivity to the issue of civilian casualties. In 2007 I was training journalists in Helmand, one of the most volatile regions of Afghanistan. A reporter came to me with what I considered a totally ridiculous story about foreign forces “beheading” civilians in Helmand.

“I have a survivor,” he said. A survivor of a beheading? Not likely.

But the reporter turned out to be right, albeit not on the terminology. He meant “throat-cutting.”

Residents of a small village in Garmsir district told a terrifying tale of a raid that allegedly killed 17. They described helicopters landing in the middle of the night, heavily armed soldiers breaking into their houses, and, in one particularly shocking account, slitting the throats of three brothers they took to be Taliban. One of the brothers survived; the doctor who sewed up his neck informed the reporter, who snuck into the hospital to interview the man.

Knowing how explosive such an article could be, we checked it out thoroughly. We talked to dozens of eyewitnesses and interviewed tribal elders from Garmsir.

We received indirect confirmation through the hospital, and also from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

I asked General Dan McNeill, then the Commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, for a comment. “If you want to know what happened in Garmsir, ask the people who did it,” he barked.

“I am told it was U.S. Special Forces,” I ventured.

“Why ask me questions you already know the answer to?” was his oblique reply.

So we published.

The United Nations started an investigation. A British journalist wrote a book. The ICRC took up the case.

The journalist who actually wrote the story was thrown in jail – fortunately, just for a few days.

As for me – I lost my job. The funder, the British government, discontinued the media project I was working on, claiming, of course, that it had nothing to do with the Garmsir story.

So when will we get the truth about what happened over the weekend in Kunar? Not soon enough, I'm afraid