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European Languages

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The New York Times

## Afghan Team Says NATO Killed Civilians in Strikes

By ALISSA J. RUBIN

2/27/2011

Afghan investigators said Sunday that they were convinced that [NATO](#) forces killed 65 civilians in airstrikes in eastern [Afghanistan](#) this month, a charge that, if true, would be one of the worst civilian casualty episodes of the war.

NATO officials, who are still investigating the claims, have insisted that the people killed were insurgents.

The [Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission](#) and the [United Nations](#) are also investigating and have not completed their reports, which typically are the most thorough investigations and are perceived as impartial.

“It’s difficult for us to speak at this stage or verify any fact,” said Ahmad Nader Nadery, of the commission. “We have had experiences that civilian casualties were underreported and ISAF,” the NATO-led coalition, “was not very quick to report correct numbers, but we also have seen instances in which communities are being threatened by the [Taliban](#) so they exaggerate the numbers and sometimes they have false stories. So we need to be careful.”

He added that the overall trend since Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#) took over as NATO commander here in 2009 had been for NATO to acknowledge civilian casualties.

Since [the attack on the night of Feb. 17](#) in the mountain valleys of Ghaziabad district in eastern Kunar Province, an insurgent-held area, there have been conflicting reports of what happened. Most members of the government's investigating committee did not go to the village where the attack took place because the area is too dangerous.

Based on reports from tribal elders and survivors, the government team concluded that NATO had fired on civilians. "Basically, as soon as the villagers heard the shooting and planes roaring overhead, they all struggled to take refuge in an old trench that was used by the mujahedeen during jihad" against the Russians, said Shahzada Massoud, the Afghan leader of the investigation and special adviser for tribal affairs to President [Hamid Karzai](#).

Mr. Karzai's office issued a statement saying that the delegation had paid compensation to the families of the bombing victims and requested a further investigation to determine ways to prevent a similar occurrence in the future.

Another member of the investigation team, a former member of Parliament, Shuja ul-Mulk, did go to the village and came back with a slightly different report. Although he also says he believes that the casualties were civilians, he said he counted 27 graves and gave a different breakdown for the numbers of men, women and children. He described frightened villagers who, when they heard the helicopters coming, ran outside for fear they would be bombed in their houses. They went to hide in the Soviet-era trenches and were bombed as they hid, he said.

"Those who succeeded in reaching the trenches were killed when the trench collapsed after it was hit by rockets or bombs being fired from coalition helicopters," he said. "Those who were on their way to the trench were killed by rockets or bullets. I visited the trench. I saw old, dried blood. I saw women and children's garments. I saw blood-stained walls of the trench. I saw pieces of blankets and cotton from the quilts the villagers wrapped themselves in because of the cold weather."

However, the discrepancy in how many graves Mr. Mulk saw versus the number of people the government reported had been killed points to some of the difficulties in assessing civilian casualties. It can be difficult to tell whether graves are new or old, or recently dug up to appear fresh, human rights organizations said. The same is true of blood stains. Similarly, the number of graves often does not correspond to the number of bodies, since there can be several bodies in a grave.

NATO, in its initial public statements last week, said that video of the assault showed armed men meeting and then dispersing on a mountainside. A NATO spokesman, Rear Adm. Gregory J. Smith, said that he saw no sign that civilians or civilian houses were attacked, although he did not rule out the possibility of civilian casualties.

NATO has acknowledged that seven to nine civilians were wounded.

Admiral Smith also said that NATO had recorded conversations among the militants discussing the idea of reporting civilian casualties to the local authorities so that they would ask NATO to stop shooting.

The NATO videos and sound recordings have not been played to reporters, making any inferences difficult to assess independently. The Afghan investigators did not see or hear the recordings, Mr. Shahzada said.

In Kandahar on Sunday, at least eight people were killed, two of them police officers, when a bomb exploded in the midst of a dogfight, [a favorite spectator sport in the area](#) and one that attracts many local commanders and police officers. The bomb is believed to have been set by the Taliban, who banned [dogfighting](#) when they controlled the government.

“For the last few months, dogfighting took place here in this field,” said Agha Jan, a tribal elder. “But today the police were all around and some old police commanders were attending the festival and police were securing the area, so Taliban knew that the police commanders were at the dogfight, so that’s why it was targeted.”

It was the second time that the Taliban attacked a dogfight in Kandahar Province. The last time, in 2008, at least 80 people died.

In Kabul, Parliament elected Abdul Raouf Ibrahimy, a compromise candidate, to be speaker. He is a little known lawmaker from the minority Uzbek ethnic group who represents Kunduz Province, in the north of the country.

He is widely considered to be loyal to the party of [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#), a notorious warlord, according to people in Kunduz. His election ends a five-month period since the parliamentary election in September in which the body had been unable to meet because it had not elected a speaker.

However Mr. Ibrahimy’s election may not break the stalemate because Parliament remains split between supporters of the former speaker, Yunus Qanooni, a Tajik, and supporters of a Pashtun

warlord, Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf. The two men, who had nearly tied for the post in previous elections, agreed not to run in order to end the standoff. But it remains unclear whether Mr. Ibrahimi has enough support from either camp to move the body forward.

On Sunday, two NATO service members died, one after an insurgent attack in eastern Afghanistan and the other in a roadside bomb explosion in southern Afghanistan, according to a NATO statement.