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## Tighter Rules Fail to Stem Deaths of Innocent Afghans at Checkpoints

By RICHARD A. OPPEL

3/26/2010

KABUL, Afghanistan — American and NATO troops firing from passing convoys and military checkpoints have killed 30 Afghans and wounded 80 others since last summer, but in no instance did the victims prove to be a danger to troops, according to military officials in Kabul.

“We have shot an amazing number of people, but to my knowledge, none has ever proven to be a threat,” said Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who became the senior American and NATO commander in Afghanistan last year. His comments came during a recent videoconference to answer questions from troops in the field about civilian casualties.

Though fewer in number than deaths from airstrikes and Special Forces operations, such shootings have not dropped off, despite new rules from General McChrystal seeking to reduce the killing of innocents. The persistence of deadly convoy and checkpoint shootings has led to growing resentment among Afghans fearful of Western troops and angry at what they see as the impunity with which the troops operate — a friction that has turned villages firmly against the occupation.

Failure to reduce checkpoint and convoy shootings, known in the military as “escalation of force” episodes, has emerged as a major frustration for military commanders who believe that civilian casualties deeply undermine the American and NATO campaign in Afghanistan.

Many of the detainees at the military prison at [Bagram](#) Air Base joined the insurgency after the shootings of people they knew, said the senior NATO enlisted man in Afghanistan, Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Hall.

“There are stories after stories about how these people are turned into insurgents,” Sergeant Major Hall told troops during the videoconference. “Every time there is an escalation of force we are finding that innocents are being killed.”

One such case was [the death of Mohammed Yonus](#), a 36-year-old imam and a respected religious authority, who was killed two months ago in eastern Kabul while commuting to a madrasa where he taught 150 students.

A passing military convoy raked his car with bullets, ripping open his chest as his two sons sat in the car. The shooting inflamed residents and turned his neighborhood against the occupation, elders there say.

“The people are tired of all these cruel actions by the foreigners, and we can’t suffer it anymore,” said Naqibullah Samim, a village elder from Hodkail, where Mr. Yonus lived. “The people do not have any other choice, they will rise against the government and fight them and the foreigners. There are a lot of cases of killing of innocent people.”

After assuming command last summer, General McChrystal moved to reduce the killing of civilians through directives that, according to [United Nations](#) human rights researchers, have led to a 28 percent reduction in such casualties last year by American, NATO and Afghan forces. The biggest impact was reducing deaths from aerial attacks, which fell by more than a third in 2009, the United Nations found.

More recently, General McChrystal moved to bring nearly all Special Operations forces in Afghanistan under his control. NATO officials said concern about civilian casualties caused by these forces was partly behind the decision, along with the need to better coordinate units and ensure that local commanders were aware of what was happening.

One unit could be doing counterinsurgency, while another carried out “a raid that might in fact upset progress,” General McChrystal explained during the videoconference.

He also challenged criticism that some of the new rules might hinder troops’ safety. “Nothing has changed to limit your right or responsibility to defend yourself,” he said.

Shootings from convoys and checkpoints involving American, NATO and Afghan forces accounted for 36 civilian deaths last year, down from 41 in 2008, according to the United Nations. With at least 30 Afghans killed since last June in 95 such shootings, according to military statistics, the rate shows no signs of abating.

And those numbers do not include shooting deaths caused by convoys guarded by private security contractors. Some tallies have put the total number of escalation of force deaths far higher.

A spokesman for the Afghan Interior Ministry, Zemary Bashary, said private security contractors sometimes killed civilians during escalation of force episodes, but he said he did not know the number of instances.

A NATO military spokesman in Kabul emphasized that commanders were not second-guessing troops, but urging them to practice “courageous restraint” and recognize that “you are more likely to be hurting someone who is confused rather than dangerous if you open fire” during an escalation of force episode.