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The Nation

Obama on Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan: "I Am Accountable"

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During his White House press conference Wednesday with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, President Obama addressed the issue of civilian deaths caused by US operations in Afghanistan. "I take no pleasure in hearing a report that a civilian has been killed," said Obama. "That's not why I ran for president, that's not why I'm Commander in Chief."

 "Let me be very clear about what I told President Karazi: When there is a civilian casualty, that is not just a political problem for me. I am ultimately accountable, just as Gen. McChrystal is accountable, for somebody who is not on the battlefield who got killed," said Obama.

That statement is quite remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it is not true. How are President Obama or Gen. McChrystal accountable? Afghans have little, if any, recourse for civilian deaths. They cannot press their case in international courts because the US doesn't recognize an International Criminal Court with jurisdiction over US forces, Afghan courts have not and will not be given jurisdiction and Attorney General Eric Holder has made clear that the Justice Department will not permit cases against US military officials brought by foreign victims to proceed in US courts. So, what does it mean to be accountable for civilian deaths? Public apology? Press conferences? A handful of courts martial?

Obama praised US forces for their restraint in Afghanistan, saying, "Because of Gen McChrystal's direction, often times they're holding fire, they're hesitating, they're being cautious about how they operate even though it would be safer for them to go ahead and take these locations out."

But how does that square with recent, heinous instances of civilian killings in Afghanistan? In February, for example, US special forces shot and killed five people, including three women who collectively had 16 children. The US military tried to <u>cover it up</u> [1] and blame it on the Taliban, <u>saying</u> [2] coalition forces "found the bodies of three women who had been tied up, gagged and killed." *The New York Times* <u>reported</u> [1] that military officials had "suggested that the women had all been stabbed to death or had died by other means before the raid, implying that their own relatives may have killed them."

Later, General McChrystal's command <u>admitted</u> [3] US-led forces had done the killing, saying it was an accident. This was hard to square with reports that soldiers may have dug bullets out of the dead bodies to try to cover it up. The head of the Joint Special Operations Command, Vice Admiral William McRaven, eventually apologized to the family of the dead Afghans and <u>offered them two sheep</u> [4] as a condolence gift. Was this accountability?

Or, what about the incident last May when US warplanes <u>bombed</u> [5] civilian houses in Farah province killing more than 100 people? The dead, <u>according</u> [6] to the Red Cross, included an "Afghan Red Crescent volunteer and 13 members of his family who had been sheltering from fighting in a house that was bombed" in the air strike. US Military sources <u>floated</u> [7] the story to NBC and other outlets that Taliban fighters used grenades to kill three families to "stage" a massacre and then blame it on the US.

"War is tough and difficult and mistakes are gonna be made," President Obama said today. Part of the problem, though, is that when "mistakes" happen and civilians are killed, attempts are made to cover them up or to blame them on the Taliban.