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European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Le Monde diplomatique

Blundering on in Afghanistan

By Philippe Leymarie

05/21/2009

President Barack Obama received his Afghan and Pakistani counterparts, Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari, at the White House on 6 May and promised that "the United States will work with our Afghan and international partners to make every effort to avoid civilian casualties as we help the Afghan government combat our common enemy." That same day the police chief of Farah province in southern Afghanistan said the US air force's strike on the village of Bala Buluk two days earlier, intended to free Afghan troops attacked by guerrillas, had resulted in more than a hundred victims, mostly civilians. As usual, investigations were launched by US and Afghan authorities, as well as UN representatives.

This kind of blunder -- or "collateral damage" to the military -- is common in Afghanistan, especially on the part of the US air force, known for its "robust" rules of engagement. According to the UN, 2,118 civilians were killed in Afghanistan in 2008, the most deadly year for its people since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001; this was an increase of almost 40% over 2007.

Back in January, thousands of people in the town of Mehtar Lam, 60 km east of Kabul in the province of Laghman, had already demonstrated -- spontaneously, according to a RFI correspondent -- after what appeared to be another mistake by the US military. He said that in the streets of Mehtar Lam "many said they were ready to join the jihad against foreign forces, to stop these blunders."

Aware of the disastrous effect of this kind of incident, President Karzai regularly denounces these accidental air strikes, which add to the population's hostility to the occupying forces and to his own government which is already accused of inaction. General Petraeus, Commander in Chief of the US forces in the Middle East and Central Asia (CENTCOM), has taken this rising anger into account in implementing new US and NATO strategy in Afghanistan, which emphasizes development and joint civilian-military operations to try to "win hearts and minds."

Lack of transparency

The American NGO, Human Rights Watch, noted last September: "High civilian loss of life during air strikes has almost always occurred during the fluid, rapid-response strikes, often carried out in support of ground troops after they came under insurgent attack", adding that "civilian deaths from air strikes act as a recruiting tool for the Taliban".

Human Rights Watch regularly condemns the lack of transparency of US authorities, which are slow to recognise their mistakes. After a raid on the village of Azizabad in the province of Herat on the 22 August 2008, which killed 90 civilians -- mostly women and children -- the US-led coalition Operation Enduring Freedom admitted to only the death of "five to seven" civilians and 30 to 35 Taliban. And that admission, which followed an internal investigation, denied the findings of the UN and Kabul government. Karzai, furious, went so far as to suggest a renegotiation of the terms of the presence of international forces

In principle, these strikes are planned and conducted only after a series of green lights by the chain of command. The rules of engagement, in order to minimize mistakes -- for example, in the case of the French fighter squadron stationed at the NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) base in Kandahar -- require "targeting" by a team of forward air controllers (called TacPy) deployed on the ground as well as "visual sighting" by the pilot before any missile launch.

These high-tech strikes from the sky against the rebels reflects an image of unequal battle -- the famous "asymmetry" often mentioned in today's conflicts -- and even of western punishment meted out to an occupied population. Such strikes have no real justification at military level. According to NATO, the Taliban attacks in the first four months of this year were up 73% over 2008, presaging a particularly hot summer.