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Time

How Afghanistan's Little Tragedies Are Adding Up

By JASON MOTLAGH

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There are large-scale civilian deaths in Afghanistan that make headlines, and then there are the small incidents that are barely noticed at all. That was the fate of 12-year-old Benafsha Shaheem.

On May 3, she was traveling with family members from her village in western Farah province to a wedding party in the neighboring province of Herat. Packed into a white Toyota Corolla wagon, they neared the outskirts of the city of Herat when, according to a report compiled by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, the vehicle was fired on by an Italian patrol convoy. Benafsha was seated in the middle of the backseat wearing a red dress, her relatives say. She was shot in the face and died instantly. Her mother was wounded in the chest. ([See pictures of U.S. troops operating in Afghanistan's deadly Korengal Valley.](#))

Italian security forces based in Herat province said the vehicle was repeatedly warned to stop before it was fired on. Benafsha's uncle, Ahmad Wali, who was driving, says traffic was moving in both directions but that rain made visibility poor. Suddenly, he recalls, sparks flew in front as armored vehicles came into view. Glass was sprayed into his face.

Such incidents are not uncommon in Afghanistan today and parallel the situation in Iraq where similar shootings were instrumental in turning popular sentiment against the coalition forces led by the United States. In Afghanistan, as it was in Iraq, when civilians die, international forces say that a suspicious vehicle approached a checkpoint or convoy and

failed to heed calls as well as possibly warning shots to stop. After those standard procedures are done, an "escalation of force" takes place.

Photos of the Shaheem family's vehicle show that multiple bullets passed through both the front and rear windshields. Afghan investigators point out that the incident took place in daylight, in moving traffic on a main road, and that most of the passengers were women. Given these facts, they say, it's hard to gauge why shots were fired. A coalition spokesman in Kabul said he was not free to discuss the shooting in more detail because of an ongoing probe.

Benafsha's death yielded just a few paragraphs in the day's wire reports, lost in the stream of bigger names and numbers. She was wrapped in a blanket inside a particle-board coffin and loaded into the trunk of the Toyota where her brother sat next to her remains for the long drive back. Within hours, another deadly U.S. air strike in Farah's Bala Boluk district would kill scores of civilians and reverberate from Kabul to Washington. Criticized around the world and beset by demonstrations in Afghanistan, the U.S. military continues to dispute the high death-toll estimates in Bola Boluk. But even so, it is low-key tragedies like Benafsha's that are adding up.

According to United Nations figures, of the 2,118 Afghan civilians killed in 2008 — an almost 40% increase versus the year before — coalition and Afghan forces accounted for 828, largely from errant air strikes and raids. Until the Bola Boluk incident, one of the worst tolls was exacted on celebrants of another wedding occasion in July in eastern Nangarhar province. Mistaken intelligence reports of an insurgent gathering prompted a U.S. air strike that left 47 people dead.

The Taliban is still to blame in most instances, using misinformation and human shields to intentionally draw civilian casualties and exploit the backlash to their advantage. Brigadier General Richard Blanchette, the coalition spokesman, says the stricter protocols have come into force down the chain of command to ensure operational decisions are fully vetted, with additional confirmation on the ground before air power is deployed. This means "taking more time" if necessary, he explains, or, if civilians are at risk, "just cancel it." While roadside incidents are trickier since they involve split-second judgment, there is a top-down emphasis on restraint. "We are spending an enormous amount of time trying to make the system as safe as possible for civilians," he says. (See pictures of the perils of childbirth in Afghanistan.)

In the aftermath of Benafsha's death, investigators from the Afghan rights commission said the presiding Italian commander contacted them to inquire how compensation could be

made. Past settlements have averaged about \$2,000, distributed through the Afghan government. In a rare gesture, the commander himself later traveled by helicopter to Benafsha's village in Farah where they say he offered her family several thousand dollars. The family refused to accept the money up front. But when it was agreed the funds would go toward building a school in Benafsha's honor, they relented.

Contacted by phone, Aref Shaheem, Benafsha's father, angrily said that coalition forces were "only killing people." They claim to be in the country to protect Afghans, he says, but they continue to take innocent lives. "They can't be trusted." As a result, he argues, the Taliban in his area only grows stronger. He says it was little consolation to learn the soldiers responsible for his daughter's death were punished, as investigators say they were told. (The coalition would not confirm this.) She is gone, he says, and so is any vestige of faith he had left in the Afghan government and its foreign backers.