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Foreign Policy

Karzai's civilian casualties ultimatum

By Erica Gaston

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This week Afghan President Hamid Karzai kicked off the Afghan fighting season with strong words, not for the Taliban, but for his international allies. On Tuesday Karzai demanded that international forces halt airstrikes on Afghan homes, or leave. "From this moment, airstrikes on the houses of people are not allowed," Karzai announced at a press conference. Karzai accused international forces of acting like occupiers, rather than allies, and implied that if their demands on civilian casualties were not heeded Afghans would respond with force. "[H]istory is a witness how Afghanistan deals with occupiers," Karzai said.

Karzai has a reputation for emotional outbursts and erratic behavior, but this was neither. It is no coincidence that this ultimatum comes in the midst of long-term strategic partnership discussions with the U.S., and at the beginning of the summer slated for the first U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan. Civilian casualties are a constant source of public outrage, and a personal tragedy for the victims involved. But they also represent the costs of the current U.S. and NATO military strategy of more aggressive operations against suspected insurgent networks, a strategy that Karzai thinks is undermining his appeals for peace. The less convinced Karzai is that this strategy will work, the less the Afghan government is willing tolerate the human costs of accelerated kill/capture operations. For now, he remains unconvinced, and so civilian casualties have risen from a public irritant to a potential roadblock in the U.S.-Afghan strategic partnership.

The immediate event that precipitated Karzai's statements was an airstrike in Helmand province

on Saturday that reportedly killed 14 civilians, two women and 12 children. This followed a string of prominent civilian casualty incidents in the last few months. In two separate episodes in the past week, in southeastern Khost and northern Takhar provinces, five civilians were reportedly killed in night raids. Earlier this month in eastern Nangarhar province, an Afghan National Police officer and his 12-year-old niece were killed in a night raid. An errant helicopter strike in March 2011 in Kunar province resulted in the killing of nine boys (made worse by ISAF mishandling the incident). A separate strike in the same area in February 2011 was alleged to have killed 65 civilians. The list goes on.

Afghan anger over civilian casualties has been a long-standing issue. Despite considerable efforts to reduce civilian harm over the past two years, civilian casualties still dominate Afghan critiques of international forces. Public demonstrations, often large, and often violent, are common following international military operations that result in alleged civilian harm. Following the night raid in Takhar province, more than 2000 Afghans engaged in a multi-day protest, with some attempting to storm the local international military base. Whereas international forces were welcomed in 2001, they are now frequently compared to Russian occupying troops, to criminal actors, or the Taliban -- often less favorably, according to a 2010 study of Afghan perceptions by my organization, Open Society Foundations. The study found that Civilian casualties, mistreatment during detention operations, and lack of accountability when these incidents occurred have played an important part in shaping those declining attitudes toward international forces.

Beginning in late 2008, international military officials found that the backlash over civilian casualties had risen to such a level that it was undermining the broader counterinsurgency strategy, creating a potent propaganda (pdf) and recruiting tool for insurgents and sapping support for the international military-backed Afghan government. Tactical directives were issued to restrict practices with a high risk of civilian casualties or outrage. Certain operations, including airstrikes, were scaled back.

But these tactical and operational restrictions were a piecemeal approach. International forces focused on the numbers of civilian casualties, but did little to address other factors feeding into the anger they caused amongst Afghans. Airstrikes, the leading cause of civilian death by international forces, decreased, but the rate of night raids, which cause an equal amount of outrage, has increased five times from what it was at the beginning of 2009.

Few meaningful efforts were made to address weak accountability for international troop conduct, which feeds into Afghan government concerns about sovereignty violations and public perceptions that international forces kill with impunity. And though civilian casualties caused by international forces decreased, those by insurgent groups skyrocketed. This not only undermined Afghan confidence in the overall strategy, but perversely increased blowback for international forces. Afghans expect that international forces will not only avoid harming them, but also will protect them from insurgents. Repeated failure to do so leads to disenchantment, and suspicion of international motives.

As a result of these factors, hostility to international troops is higher than ever, as is Karzai's frustration over the issue. A Pew research poll found that from November 2009 to November

2010, the number of Afghans who believed that attacks against international forces were justified jumped from 8% to 27%. Though public opinion polls show that a majority of Afghans still want international forces in Afghanistan, disenchantment is increasing. Karzai's comments about treating U.S. and NATO allies like other past invaders may sound shocking, but these statements are common across Afghanistan, from Friday sermons to the halls of Parliament to community jirgas.

Karzai, like many Afghans, would prefer that the U.S. focus on Pakistan, where most key insurgent leaders take shelter, instead of increasing operations in Afghanistan. Many Afghans fear that the current emphasis on kill/capture missions is not only misplaced and risky for civilians but also undermines the potential for peaceful negotiations to happen at either a local or national level. Karzai views the fact that the U.S. continues to ignore these concerns, and his repeated protests, as a violation of Afghan sovereignty.

Karzai's fundamental demands - a halt to unilateral strikes, particularly in the form of night raids and airstrikes - are largely non-negotiable issues for the U.S. The Obama Administration has made clear that it reserves the right to target those it considers to be a significant threat wherever they are found, just as it has done in Pakistan. With little wiggle room on this fundamental issue, the U.S. is heading towards a relationship with Afghanistan's government that is as strained as the relationship with Pakistan.

The U.S. can offer to scale back offensive operations, or try to involve the Afghan government more in the authorization of particular operations (as it tried with night raids after Karzai took a similarly aggressive public position on those operations this past November). However, as illustrated above, these tactical and operational approaches have been ineffective at addressing Afghan concerns because they skirt the more fundamental strategy divide between Karzai and his U.S. allies. Unless the U.S. does a better job of tailoring these tactical and operational restraints to Afghan political and strategic concerns, the impasse will endure.