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## Afghanistan's innocent victims

**U.S. drone strikes continue to leave a trail of devastated families and communities in their wake**

By Mary Meehan

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I used to think of Vice President [Joseph Biden](#) as a nice guy. Good old Joe. Down-to-earth, nice sense of humor, great family man. But last year I read the Bob Woodward book on "Obama's Wars." His account of Mr. Biden's meeting with **Afghanistan** president **Hamid Karzai** in January 2009, was a shocker. Mr. Biden was rude and arrogant, humiliating the Afghan leader before his own cabinet ministers.

He also complained about Mr. Karzai's public protest over civilian casualties from American bombing in his country. According to Mr. Woodward, "Karzai's tone sharpened. Civilian casualties were a public matter. The Americans seemed to believe the death of, say, 30 Afghan villagers was insignificant." Mr. Biden finally suggested the U.S. "can and will do a better job on this." Then he threatened, "But if you don't want us, we're happy to leave. Just tell us."

Mr. Karzai continues to protest bombing of civilians. Mr. Biden and his boss, President **Barack Obama**, would do the same — and a great deal more — if an allied nation were bombing American homes in "targeted killing" efforts.

Much U.S. surveillance and bombing is done by unmanned planes, also called drones. Close study of news reports suggests that the drones' accuracy has been highly exaggerated. But the Hellfire missiles they send into civilian homes are well-named; they do make each house they strike a hell on earth. Some family members are blown to pieces; others receive severe wounds that may lead to lifetime suffering. Some adult survivors, after recovery, still cannot work. In this way, one of the poorest countries in the world becomes even poorer.

In December 2001, a [Washington Post](#) reporter described children who were severely wounded by early and mistaken U.S. bombing of just one area near Tora Bora. Casualties included Noor Mohammed, 10 years old, who "lost both eyes and both arms." An 8-year-old boy with **head injuries** was in a coma and had a poor prognosis. Twin toddlers, both injured, did not yet know that their father had been killed. The hospital where the children were treated had taken in 71 bombing victims of various ages. About half apparently were brought in dead or dying. (There have been many similar casualties from U.S. bombings in Iraq and **Pakistan**.)

Nearly 10 years later, little had changed. In February 2010, relying on highly inaccurate reporting from drone operators in the U.S., a helicopter crew fired missiles and rockets at a pickup truck and two SUVs in southern Afghanistan. The strike killed 23 civilians — men, women, and children — and wounded 12 others. According to **The New York Times**, a U.S. report found that drone operators, working from an Air Force base in Nevada, had "tracked the convoy for 3 1/2 hours, but failed to notice any of the women who were riding along." U.S. intelligence analysts, watching a video feed from the drone, had sent two warnings "that children were visible." **Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal**, then-U.S. commander in Afghanistan, reprimanded four officers over the incident and asked Air Force leaders to investigate the drone operators. They had "reported seeing only military-age men in the truck." This raises another question, one the Times didn't address: Are all Afghan men of military age considered fair game for U.S. attacks?

U.S. attack planes, drones and gunships have killed Afghans in homes and wedding parties. They have killed civilians trying to flee dangerous areas, men collecting scrap metal for sale, and boys gathering firewood for their families. In Nangarhar province in 2008, a U.S. plane bombed a bridal procession three times, killing the bride and 46 other people. Hajj Khan, an elderly man who survived, had been holding his grandson's hand as they walked toward the groom's village. According to a British paper, the Guardian, a bomb strike threw Mr. Khan to the ground. When he opened his eyes, he said, "I was still holding my grandson's hand but the rest of him was gone. I looked around and saw pieces of bodies everywhere."

If drone surveillance were as accurate as claimed, it would pick up the large presence of women and children at weddings. Another problem is that computer operators in the U.S, running drones in Afghanistan, may assume that men collecting scrap metal, or boys gathering firewood, are actually Taliban fighters who are planting roadside bombs. But they have no right to assume that. Nor do they have a right to bomb a home — which is likely to contain women, children, and old people — because they suspect one or more insurgents are there. Such bombing is much like the terrorist tactics we claim to oppose.

The U.S. and its allies also kill innocent civilians in other countries. According to an Associated Press report in the Seattle Times, a toddler named Sirajuddin al-Sweisi was an early casualty of **NATO** bombing in Libya. "We took him to the hospital where they treated him for the burns and some **broken bones**," his uncle said last March. "But by nightfall he was dead."

Vice President Biden has been a terrific father and grandfather. President Barack Obama is also devoted to his family; his children's smiles, he once said, "fill my heart and light up my day." So I wonder: Can these powerful men put their enthusiasm for bombing on hold for a while? Long enough to think about what it does to other people's families?