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Target Germany: A Second Front in Afghanistan?

By Jason Motlagh
September 5, 2009

The details of a deadly coalition airstrike near the city of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan are yet vague. However, the attack has potentially deep military consequences as well as political ramifications far away — in Germany. NATO said in a statement that Friday's airstrike targeted militants who had stolen two fuel tankers the day before. It said that most of those killed were Taliban. But Afghan authorities are saying that civilians who had flocked to collect free fuel at the behest of insurgents died among them — with an overall death toll estimated as high as 70. If true, it would be one of the deadliest attacks on civilians since Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, issued strict new counterinsurgency rules to minimize civilian deaths.

Civilian losses had fueled anti-American sentiment in many parts of the country. The question of whether or not the attack contradicted McChrystal's guidelines is paramount. But this time, the airstrike attack was called not by U.S. forces but by the Germans overseeing a coalition supply line from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan that has grown more vital in light of threats to the normal route from Pakistan. Indeed, given that the tankers were just three miles from the German headquarters when attacked, officials believe militants might have been readying to bomb the base. The circumstances of the attack thus highlight a Taliban offensive in the region that is brazenly challenging the resolve of German forces in charge of

security — and a debate about the lack of consistency among the multinational coalition forces.

Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, Kunduz province and the region around it had stayed relatively quiet. A German Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) based just outside the eponymous provincial capital coordinated development efforts, building roads and bridges to upgrade infrastructure shattered by the war. The nature of their mission was reflected in rules of engagement: German troops were prohibited from shooting first. But a surge of roadside bombings and rocket attacks over the past year have taken the lives of several soldiers and shut down projects. Many aid workers have fled. According to one Western diplomat, construction is increasingly going to unsupervised Afghan contractors who are often forced to pay-off militants not to attack them in the districts they now control or contest. More ominously, police in the area say that among the militant ranks are groups of foreign fighters — mostly from Uzbekistan — seeking to open another front against the coalition and the Kabul government, drawing forces away from fighting the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

Now permitted to initiate the fight, German forces in July launched their biggest operation since World War II to clear Chahar Dara district, a Pashtun insurgent stronghold west of Kunduz city where hundreds of fighters travel openly in pickup trucks and demand money and food villagers. But, says local resident Abdul Matin, 28, the militants simply filtered back into the area when the Germans returned to base and police are nowhere in sight. The insurgent efforts accelerated ahead of the Aug. 20 presidential elections, which the Taliban had vowed to disrupt. President Hamid Karzai's running mate, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, was nearly assassinated in late July while traveling through Kunduz province. Rockets were fired into the city of Kunduz on the day of the vote, though no one was killed. Less than a week later, the head of the provincial justice department died in a bomb attack.

U.S. officials have grumbled about the restrictions observed by Germany and other nations who have contributed troops to the Afghan operation, saying they have not done enough of the fighting. One senior U.S. military officer who has commanded forces in Afghanistan notes the Germans "have not had to fight insurgency or even study it, so [I'm] not sure how culturally ingrained the concept of protecting civilians is to them." With thousands more American troops expected to be deployed once McChrystal makes a formal request to President Obama, the officer indicated that military planners at the Pentagon are "definitely" looking to send reinforcements to help shore up the north.

Lieut. Col. Carsten Spiering, spokesman for Germany's Kunduz PRT, counters that avoiding harm to civilians is a mission priority, even if it means letting the Taliban slip away from time to time. "We take extra care and would rather save the fight for another day than risk killing one innocent person," he says. "That's not how we operate here." (Another German officer, who asked not to be named, insisted the damage done by past U.S. airstrikes has made "everyone's job more difficult").

More and more, however, the fight is coming to the Germans. Some analysts even speculate the Taliban is deliberately ramping up hostilities ahead of the Sept. 27 German election, much as they intimidated Afghan voters last month. On Saturday, a day after the airstrike, three German soldiers were injured when a car packed with explosives exploded next to a passing convoy three miles outside of Kunduz. Indeed, Berlin's continued role in Afghanistan has become the crux of a heated public debate back in Germany. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the foreign minister bidding to oust chancellor Angela Merkel, has openly called for a timetable for German withdrawal. The chancellor says it's too soon, and she is backed by a defense minister and party ally who expects troops to remain for another five to 10 years. But polls show two-thirds of Germans want them to come home now, a sentiment that is poised to intensify in the wake of the latest airstrike. Taliban losses on the battlefield may yet amount to long-term gain from the war zones of Afghanistan.