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## Civilians Die In U.S.-NATO Air Assault In Afghanistan

By Griff Witte and Javed Hamdard  
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ISLAMABAD, [Pakistan](#), June 30 -- Just a week after Afghan President [Hamid Karzai](#) chastised international forces for being "careless," Afghan officials reported Saturday that possibly 100 or more civilians had been killed in a NATO and U.S.-led assault.

The battle in the southern Afghan [province of Helmand](#), which was prompted by a Taliban ambush, began Friday night and continued into Saturday morning, Afghan officials said. It ended with international forces bombing several compounds in the remote village of [Hyderabad](#).

"More than 100 people have been killed. But they weren't Taliban. [The Taliban](#) were far away from there," said Wali Khan, a member of parliament who represents the area. "The people are already unhappy with the government. But these kinds of killings of civilians will cause people to revolt against the government."

Another parliament member from Helmand, Mahmood Anwar, said that the death toll was close to 100 and that the dead included women and children. "Very few Taliban were killed," he said.

Spokesmen for the international forces acknowledged that civilians were killed in the battle, though they disputed the numbers. Maj. [John Thomas](#), a spokesman for the NATO force, said the civilian death toll was "an order of magnitude less" than what Afghan officials reported.

Thomas said U.S. ground forces helping to carry out a NATO mission had come under fire by Taliban insurgents using small arms, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars. Thomas said the troops responded by firing on insurgents who were shooting from a compound and a network of trenches. U.S. helicopters and [NATO](#) bombers were later brought in for support, he said.

Thomas said troops returned to the area after the battle and found what appeared to be civilian bodies among the dead insurgents in the trenches. "This confirms for us again that militants are willing to fire from among civilians," he said.

"We are deeply saddened by any loss of innocent lives," [U.S. Army](#) Maj. Chris Belcher, a coalition forces spokesman, said in a statement. "Insurgents are continuing their tactic of using women and children as human shields in close combat."

Karzai has not accepted that argument, repeatedly criticizing international troops for not doing more to protect noncombatants. After a series of particularly deadly incidents in June that Karzai blamed on poor coordination, he told reporters that international troops would have to "work the way we ask them to work."

Violence has increased in recent months in [Afghanistan](#), especially in Helmand. A NATO soldier was killed and another injured in a separate incident in the province Saturday. The force did not identify the soldiers' nationalities.


Elsewhere in Afghanistan on Saturday, three civilians were killed and seven injured when a Taliban rocket missed a NATO base in the eastern province of Kunar.

More than 2,800 people have been killed in violence in Afghanistan so far this year, compared with 4,000 killed in all of last year, according to a tally by the [Associated Press](#). The AP counts hundreds of civilians killed. Slightly more have been killed by NATO and U.S.-led forces than by the Taliban, according to several independent assessments.

*Hamdard reported from [Kabul](#).*

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