

U.S. Secret Air War Pulverizes Afghanistan and Iraq

By Conn Hallinan, Foreign Policy in Focus

Posted on September 14, 2007, Printed on September 15, 2007

<http://www.alternet.org/story/62511/>

According to the residents of Datta Khel, a town in Pakistan's North Waziristan, three missiles streaked out of Afghanistan's Pakitka Province and slammed into a Madrassa, or Islamic school, this past June. When the smoke cleared, the *Asia Times* reported, 30 people were dead.

The killers were robots, General Atomics MQ-1 Predators. The AGM-114 Hellfire missiles they used in the attack were directed from a base deep in the southern Nevada desert.

It was not the first time Predators had struck. The previous year a CIA Predator took a shot at al-Qaeda's number two man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, but missed. The missile, however, killed 18 people. According to the *Asia Times* piece, at least one other suspected al-Qaeda member was assassinated by a Predator in Pakistan's northern frontier area, and in 2002 a Predator killed six "suspected al-Qaeda" members in Yemen.

These assaults are part of what may be the best kept secret of the Iraq-Afghanistan conflicts: an enormous intensification of US bombardments in these and other countries in the region, the increasing number of civilian casualties such a strategy entails, and the growing role of pilot-less killers in the conflict.

According to *Associated Press*, there has been a five-fold increase in the number of bombs dropped on Iraq during the first six months of 2007 over the same period in 2006. More than 30 tons of those have been cluster weapons, which take an especially heavy toll on civilians.

The U.S. Navy has added an aircraft carrier to its Persian Gulf force, and the Air Force has moved F-16s into Balad air base north of Baghdad.

Balad, which currently conducts 10,000 air operations a week, is strengthening runways to handle the increase in air activity. Col. David Reynolds told the *AP*, "We would like to get to be a field like Langley, if you will." The Langley field in Virginia is one of the Air Force's biggest and most sophisticated airfields.

The Air Force certainly appears to be settling in for a long war. "Until we can determine that the Iraqis have got their air force to significant capability," says Lt Gen. Gary North, the regional air commander, "I think the coalition will be here to support that effort."

The Iraqi air force is virtually non-existent. It has no combat aircraft and only a handful of transports.

Improving the runways has allowed the Air Force to move B1-B bombers from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean to Balad, where the big aircraft have been carrying out daily strikes. A B1-B can carry up to 24 tons of bombs.

The step-up in air attacks is partly a reflection of how beaten up and overextended U.S. ground troops are. While Army units put in 15-month tours, Air Force deployments are only four months, with some only half that. And Iraqi and Afghani insurgents have virtually no ability to inflict casualties on aircraft flying at 20,000

feet and using laser and satellite-guided weapons, in contrast to the serious damage they are doing to US ground troops.

Besides increasing the number of F-16s, B1-Bs, and A-10 attack planes, Predator flight hours over both countries have doubled from 2005. "The Predator is coming into its own as a no-kidding weapon versus a reconnaissance-only platform," brags Maj. Jon Dagley, commander of the 46th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron.

The Air Force is also deploying a bigger, faster and more muscular version of the Predator, the MQ-9 "Reaper" -- as in grim -- a robot capable of carrying four Hellfire missiles, plus two 500 lb. bombs.

The Predators and the Reapers have several advantages, the most obvious being they don't need pilots. "With more Reapers I could send manned airplanes home," says North.

At \$8.5 million an aircraft -- the smaller Predator comes in at \$4.5 million apiece -- they are also considerably cheaper than the F-16 (\$19 million) the B1-B (\$200+ million) and even the A-10 (\$9.8 million).

The Air Force plans to deploy 170 Predators and 70 Reapers over the next three years. "It is possible that in our lifetime we will be able to run a war without ever leaving the US," Lt Col David Branham told the New York Times.

The result of the stepped up air war, according to the London-based organization Iraq Body Count, is an increase in civilian casualties. A Lancet study of "excess deaths" caused by the Iraq war found that air attacks were responsible for 13% of the deaths -- 76,000 as of June 2006 -- and that 50% of the deaths of children under 15 were caused by air strikes.

The number of civilian deaths in Afghanistan from air strikes has created a rift between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United States.

"A senior British commander," according to the New York Times, has pressed U.S. Special Forces (SF) to leave southern Afghanistan because their use of air power was alienating the local people. SFs work in small teams and are dependent on air power for support.

SFs called in an air strike last November near Kandahar that killed 31 nomads. This past April, a similar air strike in Western Afghanistan killed 57 villagers, half of them women and children. Coalition forces are now killing more Afghan civilians than the Taliban are. The escalating death toll has thrown the government of Hamid Karzai into a crisis and the NATO governments into turmoil. "We need to understand that preventing civilian casualties is crucially important in sustaining the support of the population," British Defense Minister Des Browne told the Financial Times.

It has also opened up the allies to the charge of war crimes. In a recent air attack in southern Afghanistan that killed 25 civilians, NATO spokesman Lt. Col Mike Smith said the Taliban were responsible because they were hiding among the civilian population.

But Article 48 of the Geneva Conventions clearly states: "The Parties to the conflict shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants." Article 50 dictates that "The presence within the civilian population of individuals who do not come within the definition of civilian does not deprive the population of its civilian character."

The stepped-up air war in both countries has less to do with a strategic military decision than the reality that the occupations are coming apart at the seams.

For all intents and purposes, the U.S. Army in Iraq is broken, the victim of multiple tours, inadequate forces, and the kind of war Iraq has become: a conflict of shadows, low-tech but highly effective roadside bombs, and a population which is either hostile to the occupation or at least sympathetic to the resistance.

It is much the same in Afghanistan. Lord Inge, the former British chief of staff, recently said, "The situation in Afghanistan is much worse than many people recognize...it is much more serious that people want to recognize." A well-placed military source told the *Observer*, "If you talk privately to the generals, they are very worried." Faced with defeat or bloody stalemate on the ground, the allies have turned to air power, much as the U.S. did in Vietnam. But, as in Vietnam, the terrible toll bombing inflicts on civilians all but guarantees long-term failure.

"Far from bringing about the intended softening up of the opposition," Phillip Gordon, a Brookings Institute Fellow, told the *Asia Times*, "bombing tends to rally people behind their leaders and cause them to dig in against outsiders who, whatever the justification, are destroying their homeland."

Conn Hallinan is a Foreign Policy In Focus columnist.

© 2007 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.

View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/62511/>