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# US strikes on al-Qa'ida chiefs kill nomads

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Published: 13 January 2007

The herdsmen had gathered with their animals around large fires at night to ward off mosquitoes. But lit up by the flames, they became latest victims of America's war on terror.

It was their tragedy to be misidentified in a secret operation by special forces attempting to kill three top al-Qa'ida leaders in south-ern Somalia.

Oxfam yesterday confirmed at least 70 nomads in the Afmadow district near the border with Kenya had been killed. The nomads were bombed at night and during the day while searching for water sources. Meanwhile, the US ambassador to Kenya has acknowledged that the onslaught on Islamist fighters failed to kill any of the three prime targets wanted for their alleged role in the 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

The wanted men are Fazul Abdullah Moham-med, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan and Abu Taha al-Sudani, who were all supposedly sheltered by the Union of Islamic Courts during its short reign in Mogadishu.

The operation, which opened a new front in Washington's anti-terror campaign, seems to have backfired spectacularly in the five days since it was launched. In addition to the scores of Somali civilians killed, the simmering civil war in the failed state has been rekindled.

Yesterday concern was mounting at the high number of civilian casualties, despite a claim by the US ambassador, Michael Ranneberger, that no civilians had been killed or injured and that only one attack had taken place. The UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, reported that an estimated 100 people were wounded in Monday's air strikes on the small fishing village of Ras Kamboni launched from the US military base in Djibouti after a mobile phone intercept.

The operation was only confirmed by the Pentagon a day after it was launched and it continued despite international protests and warnings that it risked being counterproductive.

Yesterday the Americans had boots on the ground for the first time since a 1993 mission backfired and led to a humiliating withdrawal from Somalia. According to The Washington Post, a small number of US military personnel are in southern Somalia trying to determine exactly who was killed in the raids by an AC-130 gunship.

Oxfam - which had received reports from its Somali partner organisations about the herdsmen's deaths - and Amnesty International have asked whether the the air strikes violated international law.

"Under international law, there is a duty to distinguish between military and civilian targets," said Paul Smith-Lomas, Oxfam's regional director. "We are deeply concerned that this principle is not being adhered to, and that innocent people in Somalia are paying the price."

There is also concern that the attacks by American and Ethiopian gunships have fanned the country's civil war. Somalia's main warlords yesterday appeared to agree to disarm their militias and form a new national army. But as the warlords met with the Somali President, Abdullahi Yusuf, gun battles raged outside the presidential villa underlining the scale of the security problems.

Somalia has witnessed a fresh surge in violence this week as warlords have fought to regain old ground and Islamists have attacked government forces and their allies. The Ethiopian military, acting in support of the US-backed transitional government in Somalia, had only recently routed the Islamists from the capital.

Yesterday, fighting in Mogadishu claimed the lives of at least six militia men after a clash with troops. The gun battle was believed to have been sparked by an argument over a parking space.

