
US air strikes killed over 100 Somalians

MOGADISHU: Clan elders and residents in southern Somalia said on Thursday that about 100 civilians were killed this week in US and Ethiopian air strikes on suspected al-Qaeda targets in the region.

There was no way to independently confirm the toll, and it was unclear if it referred to the same areas hit by at least one US air raid on Monday, and by other attacks believed to have been launched by Ethiopian helicopters. Sheikh Abdullahi Ali Malabon, an elder in the Afmadow area, said 100 bodies had been counted.

"We have sent a team to assess the casualties there and they have confirmed more than 100 people killed," he told AFP by phone from the remote area. "Many others were wounded but we don't have an exact number."

Closer to the Kenyan border, between the villages of Afmadow and Dhobley, residents and elders also spoke of at least 100 civilian deaths but stressed they had only yet accounted for 29 bodies, some burned beyond recognition. "I was with a team sent to the bombardment areas near Dhobley to bury the dead, what I have seen was really terrible," Absuge Mohamed Weli, a Dhobley resident told AFP.

"I counted 29 dead people, some of them burned so they could not be identified, and we have buried them," he said. "A lot of people were also wounded." "I have seen more dead bodies in the forest, I recognised some of them and they were local civilians," Weli said.

"They were killed while keeping their animals. I have also seen animals, most of them cows, dead in villages." It was not immediately clear if the Dhobley and Afmadow estimates included the same reported deaths.

"We estimate about 100 innocent civilians have been killed," said Dhobley elder Moalim Adan Osman. "Some are still missing and I think their bodies are somewhere in the forest."

"The airplanes have bombed large areas and the whole zone is jungle and no one can classify what is inside," he said. "They have bombed the nomads in the area indiscriminately." Ethiopia, which has troops in Somalia backing the country's transitional government, said on Wednesday that Monday's US strike had not caused any civilian casualties but did not mention raids conducted by Ethiopian forces. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said the US bombardments instead killed only eight "terrorists" and wounded five, who were then captured by his troops, while another seven of the 20 extremists targeted may have escaped.

But Mohamed Ibrahim Guled, an Afmadow resident, said "a lot" of civilians had been killed by the US raid.

"We haven't seen any al-Qaeda members killed but what we can confirm is that a lot of innocent civilians have been killed by the American warplanes," he told AFP. "They hit civilian sites and forests where nomads keep animals."

Dirir Moalim Hussein, a herder, said his wife and two other members of his family were killed as they tried to flee the attacks on their village of Bulo Haji between Dhobley and Afmadow.

"We are really scared," he said. "We heard bombing and heavy explosions over our village, it was dark and no one could see well. I ran with two children, I don't know in what direction, but three of my family were killed, including my wife."

"I have nothing right now," Hussein said. "I have lost everything, they have bombed my cows and goats, we don't know what crime we committed and we have been punished for no reason," Hussein said.

The US has confirmed hitting at least one suspected al-Qaeda position in southern Somalia on Monday but declined to comment on reports of airborne attacks on Tuesday and Wednesday reported by locals.