

US slaughter intensifies in Afghanistan

By Bill Van Auken
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The US military claimed responsibility for killing scores of insurgents over the weekend as it unleashed its long-awaited offensive against Kandahar, Afghanistan's second-largest city.

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the NATO umbrella organization for the US-led occupation, reported the largest body counts in two eastern regions of the country.

In eastern Laghman Province, ISAF reported that a US-led air assault killed at least 30 in an "engagement with enemy fighters" in the Alishing district. The report claimed that there were no injuries to civilians in the area.

On Saturday, however, several hundred Afghans demonstrated in the streets of Mihtarlam, the provincial capital, to protest the slaughter of unarmed civilians in the raid. The protesters chanted slogans condemning the US-led occupation.

The Afghan news agency PAN quoted one of the demonstrators, Sharifulla, as saying that no militants had been killed in the operation and that all the victims were noncombatants. The *New York Times* also quoted a Taliban spokesman as saying there was no activity on the part of its fighters in the area and that all of those killed had been civilians.

Police used fire hoses and fired live ammunition to disperse the demonstrators. "It was not really a protest," the provincial police chief, Ghulam Aziz, told the *Times*. "It was actually an insurrection by some elements who want to disrupt security."

After the protests, a spokesman for ISAF said, "If there's an indication at all of civilian casualties, we will investigate it."

The other major killing field was in eastern Khost province, where a NATO spokesman reported that 42 "insurgents" were killed in US air strikes after they were detected attempting to cross the border from Pakistan.

Separately, ISAF reported that four "insurgent commanders" had been arrested or killed in Khost, Paktika and Helmand provinces. These appeared to be the result of continuing raids by special operations killing squads that are directed against suspected participants in the armed groups opposing the occupation and the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai. These raids have been a major source of civilian casualties.

In another incident, a spokesman for the US-led occupation was forced to acknowledge that US troops had shot and killed two civilians in southern Helmand Province on Sunday. The killings took place in the town of Musa Qala, where troops had set up checkpoints following attacks by members of the Afghan resistance.

The military claimed that the two men, who were riding a motorcycle, ignored "verbal and visual warnings" and continued to accelerate while heading toward the checkpoint. "Initial reports indicate coalition forces followed the appropriate escalation of force procedures," the ISAF report concluded. That such killings of unarmed civilians are deemed "appropriate" only underscores how common they are, with most going unreported.

Occupation officials reported Saturday that three NATO troops had been killed in two separate bomb blasts, one in the east of the country and the other in the south. They gave no details on the attacks or the nationality of those killed.

The latest fatalities bring to 531 the number of foreign troops killed so far in 2010, which is already the bloodiest year for the occupation since the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001.

Meanwhile, the main focus of US military operations is in and around the southern city of Kandahar, where the largest offensive in the nearly ten-year occupation is now unfolding.

Some 8,000 US troops, the majority of them drawn from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team and the 101st Airborne Division, together with Afghan puppet forces and some other foreign troops, are carrying out attacks in the Arghendab River Valley. This is a key approach route to Kandahar and links the city, a Taliban stronghold, to neighboring Helmand Province, which is also a center of the insurgency.

Dubbed Operation Dragon Strike, the attacks have been concentrated in the Zhari and Panjwai districts of Kandahar Province, which are immediately to the west of the city. PAN, the Afghan news agency, cited local officials as reporting that at least five Taliban fighters were killed in clashes Sunday.

The US troops have reportedly been compelled to move slowly because of numerous improvised explosive devices planted by the resistance.

ABC News correspondent Miguel Marquez reported from the scene of the offensive: "Throughout the night loud explosions echoed through the Valley as 72-ton Assault Breacher Vehicles cleared wide paths through the thick agricultural area along the Arghendab River which soldiers call 'the greens.' Smaller mine-clearing charges were used to clear foot paths of possible improvised explosive devices. The threat of IEDs is the biggest threat to soldiers as they move into territory controlled by the Taliban for years. Soldiers spent much of the night stringing the plastic explosive C4 to trees and walls to destroy known Taliban fighting positions."

To what extent this clearing of "wide paths" by 72-ton vehicles is destroying the crops of local farmers in the Arghendab valley, the reporter did not indicate. Such destruction seems likely however, and would undoubtedly increase support for the resistance in an area that has exhibited deep hostility to the presence of foreign troops.

Marquez quoted local commanders as comparing the operation in Kandahar to "squeezing an orange" and predicting that it would take months to complete. For the most part, he reported, local residents "keep their distance" from US troops as they patrol Sengaray, a community of roughly 10,000 people in Zhari district that has been occupied by the 101st Airborne.

Brig. Gen. Josef Blotz, an ISAF spokesman, warned Sunday, "We expect hard fighting." US troops, he said, would be "destroying Taliban fighting positions so they will not have anywhere to hide."

"Afghan and coalition forces are repeatedly hitting the insurgents in their backyard, allowing them no time to regroup," said another spokesman, Col. Rafael Torres, director of ISAF's Joint Operations Center. His choice of words only underscored the fact that the US-led military force is attacking an indigenous popular insurgency.

An estimated 30,000 US and other foreign occupation troops have been massed in Kandahar. The offensive was launched shortly after the last of the additional 30,000 US troops deployed to Afghanistan in the Obama administration's military surge arrived in the country. There are now nearly 100,000 US troops deployed in Afghanistan, together with some 50,000 NATO and other foreign forces.

The Kandahar operation has been widely described as crucial for the Obama surge. However, US officials have until recently been downplaying the military offensive, following the failure of a much-touted offensive in the Marjah district of Helmand Province last February to uproot the resistance.

ABC News quoted two officers involved in the offensive on the "clear, hold and build" strategy being pursued by the US military.

"This is where you separate the enemy from the people," said Lt. Col. Johnny Davis, commander of the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment. "This is one of the many phases where we not only bring heavy security, but we bring governance where governance has not been before."

Capt. Brant Auge, the commander of Bravo Company, told ABC: "The reason it hasn't worked is because we are giving people a choice between us and the Taliban. The Afghan government is the key, because they're the ones who can win this thing. It's not a choice between us and the Taliban, it's a choice between the Afghan government and the Taliban."

This supposed "choice" highlights the crisis of the US occupation. The Washington-backed Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai is more discredited now than ever, particularly after September 18 parliamentary elections characterized by rampant fraud.

Evidence of the wholesale vote rigging has continued to mount over the past week, with the Electoral Complaints Commission, a joint Afghan-international monitoring body, reporting nearly 4,000 complaints. Over 1,000 of these have already been classified as "potentially significant," meaning the fraud reported could have affected the outcome of the race.

Amateur videos have surfaced showing election officials and police stuffing ballot boxes and campaign officials openly haggling over the price for buying votes.

In one case in Kandahar Province, border police "handcuffed and detained for the entire day of the election" three separate groups of election workers to prevent them from counting ballots. The workers were then presented with polling papers filled in with fraudulent results and ordered to sign them. Apparently, the operation was coordinated by a close political ally of the local political strongman, Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's brother.

The *New York Times* also reported violent intimidation of voters in the northern province of Takhar by gunmen supporting Abdul Baqi, a candidate.

"Mr. Baqi and his gunmen were slapping and pulling people to the ballot boxes to vote for him," a local resident told the paper. He added that the gunmen went to the polling section for women and forced election workers to stuff their ballot box with 200 fraudulent votes.

"From an overall democracy-building perspective, it does not look rosy," a Western diplomat told the *Times*.

The reports make a mockery of Washington's assertions that the election represented some sort of democratic advance. The senior US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, claimed last week

that “the people of Afghanistan sent a powerful message” to the Taliban. On the contrary, the gross fraud and violence perpetrated upon the Afghan people in the course of this rigged vote has undoubtedly strengthened support for those resisting foreign occupation.
