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- Around the World
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- Historical analysis
- Economics



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 - Contacts
 - Iraq-War board rules
 - Articles
 - Iraq News
 - Around the World
 - Historical analysis & facts
 - Current analysis
 - Economics
 - Hot News
 - Rankings
 - Forums

RSS feeds

Weather

Calendar-Filter

< May > < 2009 >

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

Today

US-led strikes 'kill 100' in Afghanistan

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US-led strikes 'kill 100' in Afghanistan

HERAT, Afghanistan (AFP) – Police in Afghanistan said Wednesday that US-led air strikes against insurgents had killed 100 people including civilians, in one of the deadliest attacks in nearly eight years.

The US military opened an investigation into strikes late Monday and Tuesday in the remote western province of Farah, as Afghan President Hamid Karzai ordered his government to probe reports of high civilian casualties.

"In general 100 people have been killed in the two villages," provincial police chief Abdul Ghafar Watandar told AFP, correcting information he gave earlier indicating that "more than 100 non-combatants" had been killed.

"Now we are trying to find out what number of them are combatants and what number are civilians," he said.

Watandar said earlier that "the number of civilians killed in this operation is way more than 30 but we do not have an exact figure at this stage."

Deputy provincial governor Mohammad Younus Rasouli he had seen the bodies of about 20 children brought to the provincial capital on Tuesday by villagers.

If confirmed, the figure of 30 would one of the highest civilian death tolls in air strikes by foreign forces who invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to oust the extremist Taliban regime and then remained to root out militant insurgents.

Farah province governor Rohul Amin said the Taliban were in control of the area — the volatile Bala Buluk district about 600 kilometres (350 miles) from Kabul — making it difficult to verify numbers.

The insurgents who attacked the security forces took shelter in civilian homes, accounting for at least some of the civilian casualties, he said.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Kabul said it had sent a team to investigate on Tuesday after locals appealed for help.

"Dozens of people were killed, including women and children," ICRC spokeswoman Jessica Barry told AFP. "We can absolutely confirm that there are civilian casualties."

One of the dead was a community volunteer for the Afghan Red Crescent Society, who was killed along with 13 members of his family, she said.

Karzai said in a statement that he would raise the issue with US President Barack Obama when he meets him in Washington later Wednesday.

He "ordered the ministry of interior and relevant authorities to investigate possible civilian casualties," the statement said.

The killing of ordinary Afghans in the fight against extremists is a main source of tension between Karzai and the United States, on which fragile Afghanistan depends for security and aid.

A member of the Farah provincial council, Balqis Roshan, said her information, based on talking to locals including some admitted to hospital in the town of Farah, was that more than 150 civilians had been killed.

A US military team went out to the area on Wednesday to see what had happened, spokesman Colonel Greg Julian told AFP.

"There was an Afghan police unit that came under fire from insurgents after this execution of three local citizens out there and they called for back-up support," Julian said.

"There was a significant amount of fire coming from certain areas and they called in air support to eliminate that."

Afghan officials said Tuesday the fighting had erupted after Taliban had on Monday publicly executed three Afghan civilians on allegations of spying.

The Afghan defence ministry demanded in a statement that the international security forces coordinate their operations with local forces as per an agreement reached months ago to reduce civilian casualties.

There are roughly 70,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, more than half of them from the United States which has pledged an extra 21,000 to tackle the extremist threat.

The ICRC and nongovernment groups have warned that the deployment of extra troops would likely lead to increased fighting and more civilian casualties.

Last year was the deadliest for civilians caught up in the conflict, according to UN figures that say nearly 2,200 were killed, about 55 percent in insurgent attacks and nearly 40 percent by pro-government force action.

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