

# 'I was still holding my grandson's hand - the rest was gone'

In the second of our series of dispatches from the ravaged country, Afghans explain how mounting civilian casualties are aiding Taliban recruiting

Clancy Chassay, *The Guardian*, 16 December 2008

It was 7.30 on a hot July morning when the plane came swooping low over the remote ravine. Below, a bridal party was making its way to the groom's village in an area called Kamala, in the eastern province of Nangarhar, to prepare for the celebrations later that day.

The first bomb hit a large group of children who had run on ahead of the main procession. It killed most of them instantly.

A few minutes later, the plane returned and dropped another bomb, right in the centre of the group. This time the victims were almost all women. Somehow the bride and two girls survived but as they scrambled down the hillside, desperately trying to get away from the plane, a third bomb caught them. Hajj Khan was one of four elderly men escorting the bride's party that day.

"We were walking, I was holding my grandson's hand, then there was a loud noise and everything went white. When I opened my eyes, everybody was screaming. I was lying metres from where I had been, I was still holding my grandson's hand but the rest of him was gone. I looked around and saw pieces of bodies everywhere. I couldn't make out which part was which."

Relatives from the groom's village said it was impossible to identify the remains. They buried the 47 victims in 28 graves.

Stories like this are relatively common in today's Afghanistan. More than 600 civilians have died in Nato and US air strikes this year. The number of innocents killed this way has almost doubled from last year, and tripled from the year before that. These attacks are weakening support for the Afghan government and turning more and more people against the foreign occupation of the country.

"If things were going OK maybe we could accept the occasional mistake. But with the economy the way it is, the worsening security situation, and the lack of development - when they kill civilians on top of everything else, it's too much for people," says Jahid Mohseni who

runs Tolo TV, Afghanistan's most popular television station, with his two brothers.

The US military initially denied any civilians had been killed in the Kamala bombing but later said they were investigating the incident. When asked this week for an explanation of events on that morning in July, the US military in Afghanistan said they were unfamiliar with the specifics but would look into it.

The latest figures from the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, taken a month ago, suggest about 750 civilians have been killed by foreign forces this year. Most were killed in air strikes. The remainder were shot by jumpy soldiers, who often open fire in crowded public places after an attack on one of their convoys.

Humanitarian aid agencies say privately that they believe the figure is significantly higher, as many victims classed as "insurgents" are actually non-combatants.

As the situation deteriorates across the country, the killing of civilians is seen as a final affront in a litany of mistakes by the foreign forces in Afghanistan. Patience among ordinary Afghans has worn thin and anger grows with each attack.

In July this year hundreds of Afghans took to the street in Nangarhar province after the air strike on the wedding party. The riots turned violent as protesters raged against the foreign occupiers and the government they support. The army eventually had to be called in to quell the rioting.

Civilian casualties are not new to Nangarhar province - last year a convoy of US Marines hit by a bomb attack subsequently opened fire in a bazaar killing 16 people. The marines involved were sent home and their officers charged, but a subsequent ruling cleared them of responsibility for the deaths.

Nato and US spokesmen say their forces go to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties. But all too often after an air strike, they deny

civilians are among the dead or claim far fewer were killed.

A recent Human Rights Watch report said US investigations, when launched, have been "unilateral, ponderous, and lacking in transparency, undercutting rather than improving relations with local populations and the Afghan government".

The routine denials and hands-off attitude are contributing to a growing sense among Afghans that their lives are cheap in the eyes of the foreigners.

"We know they don't intend to kill the civilians but we don't believe they care enough not to," said Ahmad Zia, a jeweller in Kabul's busy bazaar. "If it continues we will see a lot more people joining the fight against the foreigners. It's inevitable."

The accidental targeting of wedding parties in Afghanistan has only deepened resentment. Last month 27 people were killed when a wedding party was bombed near Kandahar. It was the third wedding party to be hit this year alone.

He says many of the incidents result when planes are brought in to protect forces coming under fire. "Their troops are in trouble so they call in the air strikes without considering that it is a civilian area."

Sharif Hassanyar, a former interpreter with US Special Forces who is now working as a journalist, described how decisions were taken to bomb areas based on flimsy intelligence.

"I remember when I was working with a group of Rangers and a spy in the area told them the Taliban were training in a garden of a house so they bombed the house, without checking the information. Afterwards they found out that there had not been any Taliban there, only civilians were killed by the bombs," he said.

Informants for the foreign forces often give bad information either accidentally or because they are pursuing tribal or personal vendettas against individuals in neighbouring villages, he added.

"The Taliban grow very strong in the aftermath of each attack," said Hassanyar.

Mullah Zubiallah Akhond, a Taliban commander in Oruzgan province, says the attacks are sending recruits his way daily. "The people who are fighting with the Taliban are the brothers, uncles and relatives of those

killed by the Americans. They have joined the Taliban and are fighting the Americans because they want to avenge their brothers, fathers or cousins," he says.

"There are now Taliban in every village, many of them have rejoined the movement after the savage attacks carried out by the Americans."

He believes the attacks have helped turn their fight against the foreigners into a nationwide popular struggle.

"When an American vehicle is blown up every day on the main road in Wardak, the order is not coming from the Taliban leadership. It is the people themselves who have turned against the foreigners. They have come together in their villages and do not allow the foreigners to pass through their areas."

It is not just the deaths from air strikes that are poisoning the hearts of Afghans. In the capital, Kabul, each day, terrified drivers swerve out of the way as foreign troops hurtle through the streets in their armoured convoys training their rifles on the drivers and pedestrians and shouting obscenities: "Stay the fuck back!"

The Afghans know to keep out of the way. Last year a US military convoy ploughed into several vehicles, killing seven people including a family. The incident sparked a riot involving thousands of angry Kabul residents. It was suppressed only after the security forces started shooting protesters on the streets. At least 15 people were killed.

"The anti-American feelings in Afghanistan are not just coming from conservative or religious elements," said Shukria Barakzai, a female MP.