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NATO Probing Deadly Airstrike

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Anti-Taliban Operation in Afghanistan May Have Killed Civilians And Further Complicated the Strained U.S.-Led Security Mission

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KUNDUZ, [Afghanistan](#), Sept. 4 -- NATO launched an investigation Friday into a predawn airstrike in which an American fighter jet bombed two hijacked fuel trucks in northern Afghanistan, killing scores of people and prompting accusations that many of the dead were civilians.

Estimates of the number of dead varied widely. The governor of Kunduz province, where the attack occurred, said 72 people were killed when the trucks exploded in a huge fireball, while the German military said the death toll was about 50. German forces under NATO command have responsibility for the area and had called in the airstrike out of concern that the Taliban intended to use the trucks in suicide bombings, German officials said.

A senior U.S. defense official said 56 people were counted around and on top of the vehicles in video taken immediately before the blast. "Nobody that was close . . . lived," he said. "But it's also not clear whether the individuals who are around the vehicles there were actually insurgents or not.

A Belgian soldier who visited the village nearest the site of the attack, Staff Sgt. Filip Bergeman, said residents told him that Taliban fighters forced several villagers to help remove fuel from the trucks after the vehicles got stuck in the Kunduz River. Bergeman said he was told that 14 of the villagers were killed.

The airstrike occurred a day after Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates indicated that he is open to increasing U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan despite earlier concerns about an outsize American "footprint" in the country. Gates said his view had been altered by an assessment submitted this week to President Obama by Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, which stressed the importance of troops' interactions with civilians and efforts to reduce civilian casualties.

President Hamid Karzai also ordered an investigation into the strike, saying that "targeting civilians is unacceptable for us." Civilian deaths as a result of NATO military operations have fueled intense anger among many Afghans, including Karzai, and have sapped public support for the multinational mission to combat the Islamist Taliban movement, which has gained ground this year against a government widely viewed as corrupt and incompetent.

In a taped message Friday night, McChrystal appeared to acknowledge the likelihood of civilian casualties in the airstrike, saying, "I take this possible loss of life or injury to innocent Afghans very seriously."

Translations of the message into the two main Afghan languages, Pashto and Dari, were distributed to the Afghan media. Addressing "the great people of Afghanistan," McChrystal said the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had "launched an attack against what we believed to be a Taliban target in Kunduz. As commander, nothing is more important [to me]

than the safety and protection of the Afghan people."

In an effort to reduce civilian deaths, McChrystal recently issued rules limiting the use of airstrikes. It was not immediately clear whether Friday's airstrike conformed to the new rules.

The NATO command in Afghanistan pledged to fully examine the airstrike, and McChrystal said in his message that he had dispatched a team of senior officers Friday afternoon to look into the incident. The officers allowed a Washington Post reporter to accompany them.

Footage from the F-15E jet that dropped the bombs showed that many, if not most, of the people milling around the trucks in the moments before the airstrike were killed when the bombs detonated and the fuel tankers exploded. The grainy, black-and-white video, which was viewed by the investigating officers at a German military base here, showed only a handful of people running away after the explosion.

The German officers said footage from the F-15E and an earlier overflight of a U.S. B-1B bomber showed some of the people at the scene carrying weapons. The Germans also said that an intelligence source told them before the strike that all of the people around the trucks were insurgents.

"When you're sitting at a command center, it may look like you're seeing nothing but insurgents, but the reality can be pretty complex," said Rear Adm. Gregory J. Smith, a senior member of the U.S. assessment team. "We have to do everything we can to understand the truth and get that truth told as quickly as possible."

Insurgent activity has increased markedly in the Kunduz area in recent months. German forces responsible for securing the province have encountered more frequent ambushes and roadside bombings.

According to the German officers, the incident began Thursday evening when insurgents hijacked the two trucks on the main highway connecting Kunduz to the Tajikistan border. The B-1B bomber, which was flying in the area in support of a different mission, spotted the vehicles several hours later after they had become bogged down while trying to cross the river, 13 miles south of Kunduz, the provincial capital. German commanders declared the scenario an imminent threat and requested air support.

Two F-15Es arrived on the scene about 2 a.m. Friday. After receiving instructions from a German targeter, one of the planes dropped two 500-pound bombs, one on each truck, about 30 minutes later.

"While the airstrike was clearly directed at the insurgents, ISAF will do whatever is necessary to help the community, including medical assistance and evacuation as requested," said Canadian Brig Gen. Eric Tremblay, an ISAF spokesman.

In Washington, U.S. military officials said two 500-pound GBU-38 bombs were dropped on the trucks. The bombs are guided using Global Positioning System technology.

The German-led team operating in the area made the decision to call in the airstrike, said one U.S. official, who was briefed on the events by the command in Afghanistan. "We are looking into any allegations of civilian casualties," the official said. "Any civilian casualties are serious."

It was not immediately clear at what level in the U.S. chain of command the strikes were approved or how the military determined that there were no civilians in the area.

Staff writers Ann Scott Tyson, William Branigin and Karen DeYoung in Washington contributed to this report.

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