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US airstrikes kill at least 30 civilians in Afghanistan

Local officials and residents have confirmed that US airstrikes on Tuesday night killed at least 30 civilians in southern Afghanistan's Helmand Province.

These tragic deaths are the latest war crime in the 17-year US-NATO occupation, aimed at subjugating the geo-strategically critical nation to the dictates of the US and its allies. The strikes were part of a "surge" of US air attacks designed to terrorise the population and stem a deepening crisis of the Afghan government and security forces amid ongoing advances by Taliban fighters.

US and Afghan military officials claimed that the strikes were carried out after they came under fire from rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns. As is invariably the case after killing civilians, US-NATO forces said they were targeting a "Taliban compound" in the Garmsir district, and that they were unaware civilians were in the area.

Local residents, however, told Reuters yesterday that all of those who perished were civilians. One, named Feda Mohammad, said: "The area is under the control of Taliban but all of the victims of last night's bombing are civilians." He stated that some of those hit by the strike are still buried under rubble.

Another resident, Mohammadullah, commented: "Foreign forces bombed the area and the bombs hit my brother's house." He said that the dead included women and 16 children.

Similar horrific incidents have taken place on a regular basis, especially since then senior US military commander in Afghanistan John Nicholson declared in October 2017 that "a tidal wave of air power is on the horizon." He made the statement as the administration of

President Donald Trump deployed dozens of additional UH-60 black hawk helicopters to US and Afghan forces.

According to US army statistics, American military aircraft dropped almost 3,000 bombs across Afghanistan over the first half of the year, or roughly 16 every day.

The figure was over five times larger than the number of bombs used in the first half of 2016, and twice the number dropped in the first six months of 2017. It was higher than in 2011, when, at the height of the Obama administration's "surge" in Afghanistan, US forces dropped 2,300 bombs in the first half of the year.

In July alone, US troops used 746 munitions, the largest monthly figure since October 2010.

The result of the indiscriminate bombing has been a major increase in civilian deaths and injuries.

A UN report, released last month, found that civilian casualties from US and Afghan government airstrikes increased by 39 percent over the first nine months of the year, compared to the same period in 2017.

The 639 documented civilian casualties included 313 deaths and 336 injuries. Around 51 percent of the casualties were caused by US-NATO strikes and 38 percent by Afghan Air Force attacks. Women and children comprised more than 60 percent of the casualties. Child casualties from air raids were up 53 percent in the first nine months of the year, compared to the same period of 2017.

In July, for instance, US and Afghan airstrikes killed a family of 14 in the northern city of Kunduz, including women and three young children. US and NATO forces blithely denied that the victims were civilians.

In the last week of September, at least 24 civilians were killed by Afghan and US bombings in three separate incidents. In one case, nine members of a single family died when munitions hit a teachers' home in the eastern province of Kapisa. The victims reportedly included elderly grandparents and children between the ages of two and 12.

The bombing campaign has coincided with a deepening crisis of the US-backed Afghan government. According to a report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction presented to Congress last month, the Afghan regime "controls or influences" only 55.5 percent of the country's districts, compared with 72 percent in November 2015. The data indicated that the Taliban controls 12.5 of Afghanistan, with around 30 percent of the country "contested."

It is widely reported, however, that the puppet Afghan government has control only over Kabul, the country's capital.

Taliban advances have reportedly decimated the Afghan army, which is largely composed of economic conscripts amid widespread unemployment and terrible poverty. Afghan security forces numbered 312,328 in July, down by almost 9,000 in the space of a year. The total was the lowest since 2012.

NATO has responded by bolstering the number of Western "military advisors" to Afghan forces. In August, Britain began deploying 440 additional military personnel to "assist" the Afghan army, including to provide security in Kabul.

US and NATO troops have been hit by a spike in casualties. On Tuesday, three US soldiers were killed, by an explosive device in the southeastern province of Ghazni. Three others and a military contractor were wounded in the incident, which had the highest US casualty toll in almost a year-and-a-half. Three days earlier, a US ranger was shot dead in the southwestern province of Nimroz during a firefight with militants.

The casualties threaten to undermine the Trump administration's attempts to force a negotiated settlement to the war with the Taliban.

While Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Envoy has reportedly held recent talks with Taliban officials on brokering a "peace process," China and Russia have organised their own negotiations for an end to the conflict. Each country is jockeying for influence in the country, amid mounting geo-strategic conflicts and a deepening crisis of the US occupation of Afghanistan, America's longest war.