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## The 'Mother of All Bombs' blast site is still off-limits, but here's who it may have killed

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A GBU-43B, or Massive Ordnance Air Blast weapon, the US military's largest nonnuclear bomb. Eglin Air Force Base via AP

A week after US forces dropped the 21,600-pound GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast weapon, called the "Mother of All Bombs," on a remote part of Afghanistan, American officials have released little information about the strike or its aftermath, and security forces in the area continue to block access to the site.

In a move reminiscent of Vietnam-era body-count assessments, Afghan officials have released estimates of the number of ISIS fighters killed in the MOAB strike, upping the total from 36 to 96 over the last six days.

Reports from the region indicate that several of the ISIS fighters slain were from neighboring countries.

An Afghan security source told the country's TOLO news agency that most of the militants killed in the bombing were members of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan or the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Twelve Tajiks and 13 Indian nationals who had joined ISIS are also thought to have been killed, according to TOLO.

Hindustan Times reported that an Afghan security official said 13 ISIS commanders were killed — at least two of whom were from India.

Officials in Kabul and New Delhi did not confirm those reports, and Amaq News Agency, ISIS's media outlet, said none of the terror group's fighters had been killed. After the blast, ISIS's local radio outlet broadcast a call-in show featuring men who claimed to be fighters in the area who were not affected by the bombing.

At least 24 Indian nationals are thought to have joined ISIS in eastern Afghanistan. While two reportedly were killed in the weeks before the MOAB strike, relatives of the others say they have yet to hear from them.

ISIS branches in Afghanistan expanded in 2015 and had 2,000 to 3,000 members before Afghan military operations and US-led airstrikes checked their advances. Now there are thought to be about 700 ISIS fighters in the country, limited mainly to three districts in Nangarhar, the province where the MOAB was dropped.

The MOAB was deployed on April 13 to what was described as a cave complex used by ISIS fighters. The weapon, which explodes above ground, is meant to create pressure to destroy targets on the surface and just below it.

A spokesman for Afghan special forces said land mines and "pockets of resistance" on top of mountains had slowed operations in the area, according to Agence France-Presse, whose correspondents were turned away from the site on Wednesday.

He did not specify if the resistance was being mounted by ISIS fighters.

Capt. William Salvin, a US military spokesman, told Reuters on Wednesday that US forces arrived at the site the day after the blast and had left but continued to conduct operations in the area. He said "assessments are ongoing" and expressed "high confidence" that no civilians were harmed.

"Access has been restricted, but that's because it's a combat zone," he told Reuters. "We are in contact with the enemy."

Afghan officials and locals disputed suggestions that there was resistance in the area and questioned whether the MOAB was an appropriate response to the threat.

"We were and we are kept in the dark, and still we haven't been able to go to the site," one senior Afghan security official told Reuters. "We are confused ourselves, and we wonder what MOAB could have caused."

Zabihullah Zmarai, a member of the council in Nangarhar, told The Times that officials in the district where the bomb was dropped said neither Afghan nor US forces had arrived on the scene.

Jawid Salim, a spokesman for the Afghan commandos, also told The Times it was "not true that the members of US forensic are at the scene of bombing — no one is there."

"We are in the area and we see everything," he said.

Naser Kamawal, another member of the Nangarhar provincial council, told The Times, "Why the bomb with such a big destruction had such few casualties?"



"If there was some 90 Islamic State militants, then why were our own Afghan forces not able to eliminate them in a military operation — what was the need for using such a big bomb

Afghan officials have expressed concern that the lack of information about the strike could be exploited by ISIS.

The top US commander in Afghanistan has said the focus of the fight is militants inside the country.

"This operation is conducted on those enemy that are inside the borders of Afghanistan," Gen. John Nicholson, commander of NATO's Resolute Support operation, said after the bombing.

"We're very focused on those insurgents and terrorists who try to operate inside Afghanistan, and then we work with our diplomatic colleagues to work with our neighbors and other nations in the region to reduce the external support and the external sanctuary enjoyed by these enemies."