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Fearful Villagers See the U.S. Using Afghanistan as a “Playground for Their Weapons”

Emran Feroz
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The province of Nangarhar, in eastern Afghanistan, is bearing the brunt of ongoing U.S. airstrikes against the Taliban and fighters who have declared allegiance to the Islamic State. Half of July’s U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan – at least 358 strikes – took place in eastern Nangarhar, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. And according to United Nations data

released last month, U.S. strikes in Nangarhar are more likely to result in civilian casualties than strikes anywhere else the country. On July 23, one of these strikes reportedly killed at least eight civilians, including children, who were attending a funeral, allegations of which the U.S. military is investigating.

Just last week, Afghan officials said that a U.S. attack in Nangarhar killed 16 civilians, including women and children. A spokesman for the U.S. military denied those claims, saying that the strike was “against militants [who] were observed loading weapons into a vehicle.”

But in the remote and dangerous areas where most of these strikes take place, it is often impossible to know the true identities of the victims, and many strikes go unreported. And among local villagers, distrust of both the United States and President Ashraf Ghani’s U.S.-backed government runs high.

In interviews with The Intercept this past May, villagers in Khogyani, a Taliban-controlled district of Nangarhar, described living with the threat of U.S. Special Operations ground raids and regular drone strikes. Few foreigners visit Khogyani, and even Afghans from the provincial capital, Jalalabad, prefer to avoid its villages, where insurgents rule the ground and U.S. warplanes haunt the skies.

“A few days ago, another drone strike took place. The victims were innocent farmers and their women and children,” said Shafiqullah, a driver from Basakhel.

Shafiqullah also described how locals fear the U.S. drones that appear when the sky is clear. “Many people, like myself, remove our SIM cards regularly to avoid being located,” he said. The United States has been known to identify and track targets based on the unique codes of their SIM cards. (The Intercept was unable to identify which strike Shafiqullah was referring to, although there were several strikes reported in Nangarhar at the end of April and in early May where the exact location was unclear. The London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which keeps a comprehensive list of public reporting on strikes in Afghanistan, relies largely on local press reports and statements from U.S. and Afghan military officials, which do not always specify where the strike occurred. U.S. Central Command did not respond to a request for comment on the allegations of civilian casualties in this article.)

When the Trump administration dropped the so-called “mother of all bombs” on an alleged ISIS hideout in Nangarhar in April, the Afghan government reported that more than 90 ISIS militants had been killed. The Pentagon refused to provide a number, and the U.S. and Afghan military blocked access to the strike zone, preventing outside observers and journalists from entering.

For many locals in Khogyani, which lies about an hour away from Achin, the use of the bomb was just another example of what they perceive as U.S. aggression, whether directed at Taliban insurgents or ISIS fighters.

“As usual, they had killed civilians and wanted to hide their crimes,” said Mustafa, a student from the village of Basakhel. “The U.S. is abusing our country as a playground for their weapons.”

Since the emergence of ISIS-allied militants in Afghanistan in 2015, the United States, working with Afghan forces, has reportedly killed a high number of militants through a series of airstrikes, conducted by both conventional aircraft and drones. In most cases, the identities of the alleged insurgents have not been verified, and most strikes are not investigated, opening up the possibility that many more civilians have been killed.

“The United States has been carrying out increasing numbers of air and drone strikes as this year has gone on, and a lot of them have been in Nangarhar. The full toll of these strikes in lives is not known because independent investigation is not possible,” said Jack Serle, who has been tracking drone strikes in Afghanistan since 2014 for the BIJ.

Since neither the U.S. nor the Afghan army often has access to the areas they are bombing, such as Khogyani, they rely on signals intelligence from electronic communications, and imagery taken from above. “This suggests that [the] civilian death toll will be higher than what little data we have shows, and higher than the U.S. and Afghan military realize,” said Serle.

Khogyani locals have noticed that airstrikes have increased since Donald Trump became president. “We faced war and destruction also during Obama’s era but since Trump took over the presidency, the strikes increased hugely,” said Esmatullah Bashari, a Taliban-allied commander in the district. Both local civilians and members of the Taliban maintain that most of the victims have been noncombatants.

With bravado typical of local commanders, Bashari – who once fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and is also known as a famous poet in the region — said he and his fighters were the only ones to have fought the ISIS militants effectively. “Two years ago, they also controlled Khogyani. We recaptured the district and lost 300 men,” he said.

Bashari also argued that the White House’s drone policy in the region has become a catalyst for extremism and insurgency. “After every strike, people, sometimes the whole clan, join our fight,” said Bashari, with characteristic exaggeration. “Especially when women and children get killed, the anger is enormous, they don’t have any other choice than to fight.

“The Americans don’t differentiate between civilians and insurgents. Everyone here is considered a terrorist,” Bashari said. He claimed that he had twice been targeted by drone strikes in the past two years, including one that hit a jirga, or local tribal assembly, which he was attending. At least five people — civilians, according to Bashari — were killed, while he and other Taliban fighters survived. But while Bashari escaped death at the hands of the United States, he was killed on July 14 by an unknown gunman in a Khogyani market.

Taliban fighters in Khogyani described how the deaths of family members had caused them to take up arms. As with the case with Bashari, they did not say exactly where and when the drone

strikes occurred, so their accounts could not be corroborated. It is also the case, as Serle noted, that many strikes go unreported given the remoteness of the region.

Jahan Baaz, a tall, sturdy man, said that two of his brothers were killed in drone strikes a year ago, and that he believes it is his duty to fight the Americans and their allies. Another fighter, barely 20 years old, claimed that his father had also been killed by an American drone, which led him to join the insurgents.

Such a reaction can be expected, said Patricia Gossman, a senior researcher on Afghanistan with Human Rights Watch. “Each civilian death for which U.S. or NATO forces are perceived to be responsible increases hostility toward them, and may increase support for anti-government forces,” she said.