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Afghanistan Faces Deadliest Day for Civilians This Year in Multiple Attacks

By Alissa J. Rubin and Taimoor Shah

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Afghans gathered Wednesday in Logar Province at a house where they said a NATO strike killed mostly women and children; NATO disputed that. (Ihsanullah Majroh/Associated Press)

Violence took the lives of at least two dozen Afghan civilians and possibly many more on Wednesday, making it the deadliest day for Afghan civilians so far this year. The day included a

complex suicide attack in Kandahar City and a NATO airstrike that Afghan officials and residents said had killed women and children in eastern Afghanistan.

Last week, the head of the United Nations Afghanistan office, Jan Kubis, said that in the first quarter of this year, civilian casualties had dropped for the first time since the United Nations began keeping statistics in 2007. That positive trend has appeared to be eroding in recent days. Another official in the office, James Rodehaver, said, “One thing we can say is that this has been the deadliest day of the year so far for civilians.”

The civilian deaths said to have been caused by a NATO airstrike took place in rural Logar Province, and for much of the day there were conflicting accounts of what had happened. By evening a NATO spokesman said that international forces and the Afghans had opened a joint investigation.

According to Logar residents, including health workers who received the bodies of the dead, Western Special Operations forces, working with their Afghan counterparts, received word that a Taliban commander was using a civilian home for the night with some of his fighters. The joint force prepared to attack the house. As the forces approached, they came under fire from the Taliban and called in the airstrike, said Din Mohammed Darwish, the spokesman for the governor of Logar.

“The airstrike not only damaged the house that the Taliban occupied, but it also has completely destroyed the adjacent house, which belonged to two brothers, Abdul Qayum and Abdul Bashir,” Mr. Darwish said.

Seven women, 11 children and one man were in the adjacent house, and all of them were killed, according to health clinic workers in Sajawand, the village where the strike occurred.

Zarif Nai Khail, head of Logar Province’s health department, said that at least three others had been wounded.

Initial reporting by NATO found that no civilians had been killed, but that two women had “nonlife-threatening wounds.”

The operation, which took place in Baraki Barak district, an area that has been troubled by the Taliban for more than two years, targeted a Taliban leader who “planned and participated in attacks against Afghan and coalition forces” and who “commands multiple insurgents,” said Lt. Cmdr. James Williams. However, there was no information on whether that leader was killed in the attack, he said.

In Kandahar, two explosions — at least one set off by a suicide bomber on a motorcycle — killed 23 civilians near Kandahar Airfield, one of the largest coalition bases in Afghanistan, according to the Kandahar police chief and witnesses.

A Taliban spokesman, Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, claimed responsibility for the bombing.

Officials said that the target of Wednesday's attack was a small market and a hotel where Afghan security escorts for NATO supply trucks stopped between escort runs to rest and have tea. The death toll rose to 23 by midday as bodies were recovered, said Gen. Abdul Raziq, the Kandahar police chief, standing at the site as his men picked through the debris. An additional 25 people were wounded, he said.

General Raziq said the attack involved two bombs. People at the scene described a local contraption known as a zarange — a motorcycle with a wagon attached to it — that was packed with explosives and detonated. Some said it was detonated remotely; others said a bomber was riding it.

Then, as people gathered to assist the victims, a suicide bomber on a motorcycle drove into the crowd and detonated explosives.

"The suicide bomber on the motorcycle inflicted heavy casualties, including civilians: shopkeepers and laborers who are working in the small bazaar," General Raziq said. "And some of those who work as security escorts were killed; we don't know how many." The Kandahar governor, Tooryalai Wesa, who was himself the target of an assassination attempt in April, and whose province is the former Taliban heartland, condemned Wednesday's slaughter.

"The enemy of Afghanistan has once again shown their ugly face, and has brought mourning and grief to people of Kandahar, but Kandaharis will not be deterred by their un-Islamic act," he said. In northern Afghanistan, a suicide bomber detonated himself in the middle of a bazaar in Maimana, the capital of Faryab Province, usually a relatively calm area, killing at least one civilian and wounding 10, according to the public health department.

And in Paktika Province, a civilian who was traveling with family members was killed along with a child, and four other children were wounded when a roadside bomb exploded in Yahya Khel district, said Mokhlis Afghan, a spokesman for the provincial governor.

Two NATO military force members were killed when their helicopter crashed in eastern Afghanistan. The military was investigating the cause but did not rule out the helicopter's having been shot down. The Taliban claimed responsibility, saying that one of their fighters in Ghazni Province had shot it down.