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The US Military Approves Bombing Children

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In October, I blogged about an incident in Afghanistan in which three small children were killed in a US airstrike.

In that one small incident, which drew little attention at the time and since, three children aged 12, 10 and 8 were blown to smithereens in a NATO bombing while they were out gathering dung for fuel.

Now, in a despicable article in *Military Times*, the US military says that children are legitimate targets in the war in Afghanistan because sometimes the Taliban and other insurgents use kids.

In the original incident, which I cited in October, *The New York Times* reported it this way:

The...case of three children allegedly killed in a coalition strike was reported by local officials in Helmand Province's Nawa district. The officials said that the children were killed in a NATO strike on Sunday afternoon as they were gathering dung to burn as fuel, a common practice in the desert reaches of southern Afghanistan where there are few trees.

“When we reached the area I saw the three bodies of children, two boys and one girl, ages 8 to 12 years old. They were from the same family,” said Haji Hayatullah, a member of the tribal council in the Nawa district. Their family is in the livestock business and raises goats and sheep on government land, he said.

Mr. Hayatullah added: “They had been collecting the animal dung and were heading home. I saw a sack of dung and another sack that was contaminated with their blood, and I saw three to four holes in the area. It seems the insurgents were digging them to plant mines, but I did not see any men’s bodies.”

The children were identified as Borjan, 12; Sardar Wali, 10; and Khan Bibi, 8, said Haji Abdul Manaf Khan, the governor of the neighboring Marja district. The deaths occurred near the border of the Marja and Nawa districts.

The Marja governor said that NATO forces watched as improvised explosive devices were being planted, and targeted the insurgents planting them. “As a result two I.E.D. planters were killed and the shrapnel killed the three children who were wandering nearby,” he said. Other reports said that three insurgents had been killed.

A spokesman for the international forces, Maj. Adam Wojack, said that the coalition forces were aware of the allegations and that the episode was being investigated. “I.S.A.F. did conduct a precision airstrike on three insurgents in Nawa district, and the strike killed all three insurgents,” he said.

“None of our reporting shows any civilian casualties or any children.”

But on December 3 Gannett, which owns *Military Times*, ran an article headlined: “Some Afghan Kids Aren’t Bystanders.” It said:

When Marines in Helmand province sized up shadowy figures that appeared to be emplacing an improvised explosive device, it looked like a straightforward mission. They got clearance for an airstrike, a Marine official said, and took out the targets.

It wasn't that simple, however. Three individuals hit were 12, 10 and 8 years old, leading the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul to say it may have "accidentally killed three innocent Afghan civilians."

But a Marine official here raised questions about whether the children were "innocent." Before calling for the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System mission in mid-October, Marines observed the children digging a hole in a dirt road in Nawa district, the official said, and the Taliban may have recruited the children to carry out the mission.

Shockingly, the article quotes a senior officer saying that the military isn't just out to bomb "military age males," anymore, but kids, too:

"It kind of opens our aperture," said Army Lt. Col. Marion "Ced" Carrington, whose unit, 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, was assisting the Afghan police. "In addition to looking for military-age males, it's looking for children with potential hostile intent."

"Opens our aperture," indeed.