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Pentagon 'rewrites' airstrike atrocity

By Gareth Porter
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WASHINGTON - The version of the official military investigation into the disastrous May 4 airstrike in Farah province made public last week by the Central Command was carefully edited to save the United States command in Afghanistan the embarrassment of having to admit that earlier claims blaming the massive civilian deaths on the "Taliban" were fraudulent.

By covering up the most damaging facts surrounding the incident, the rewritten public version of the report succeeded in avoiding media stories on the contradiction between the report and the previous arguments made by the US command.

The declassified "executive summary" of the report on the bombing issued last Friday admitted that mistakes had been made in the use of airpower in that incident. However, it omitted key details which would have revealed the self-serving character of the US command's previous claims blaming the "Taliban" - the term used for all insurgents fighting US forces - for the civilian deaths from the airstrikes.

The report reasserted the previous claim by the US command that only about 26 civilians had been killed in the US bombing on that day, despite well-documented reports by the government and by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission that between 97 and 147 people were killed.

The report gave no explanation for continuing to assert such a figure, and virtually admitted that it is not a serious claim by also suggesting that the actual number of civilian deaths in the incident "may never be known".

The report also claimed that "at least 78 Taliban fighters" were killed. The independent human-rights organization had said in its May 26 report that at most 25 to 30 insurgents had been killed, though not necessarily in the airstrike.

A closer reading of the paragraph in the report on Taliban casualties reveals, however, that the number does not actually refer to deaths from the airstrike at all. The paragraph refers twice to "the engagement" as well as to "the fighting" and "the firefight", indicating that the vast majority of the Taliban who died were all killed in ground fighting, not by the US airstrike.

An analysis of the report's detailed descriptions of the three separate airstrikes also shows that the details in question could not have been omitted except by a deliberate decision to cover up the most damaging facts about the incident.

The "executive summary" states that the decision to call in all three airstrikes in Balabool district on May 4 was based on two pieces of "intelligence" available to the ground commander, an unidentified commander of a special operations forces unit from the US Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MarSOC).

One piece of intelligence is said to have been an intercepted statement by a Taliban commander to his fighters to "mass to maneuver and re-attack" the Afghan and US forces on the scene. The other was visual sighting of the movement of groups of adults moving at intervals in the dark away from the scene of the firefight with US forces.

A number of insurgents were said by the report to have been killed in a mosque that was targeted in the first of the three strikes. The "absence of local efforts to attempt to recover bodies from the rubble in a timely manner", the following morning, according to the report, indicates that the bodies were all insurgent fighters, not civilians.

But the report indicates that the airstrikes referred to as the "second B1-B strike" and the "third B-1B strike" caused virtually all of the civilian deaths. The report's treatment of those two strikes is notable primarily for what it omits with regard to information on casualties rather than for what it includes.

It indicates that the ground force commander judged the movement of a "second large group" - again at night without clear identification of whether they were military or civilian - indicated that they were "enemy fighters massing and rearming to attack friendly forces" and directed the bombing of a target to which they had moved.

The report reveals that two 1,100-kilogram bombs and two 4,400-kg bombs were dropped on the target, not only destroying the building being targeted but three other nearby houses as well.

In contrast to the report's claim regarding the earlier strike, the description of the second airstrike admits that the "destruction may have resulted in civilian casualties". Even more important, however, it says nothing about any evidence that there were Taliban fighters killed in the strike - thus tacitly admitting that the casualties were in fact civilians.

The third strike is also described as having been prompted by another decision by the ground commander that a third group moving in the dark away from the firefight was "another Taliban element". A single 4,400-kg bomb was dropped on a building to which the group had been

tracked, again heavily damaging a second house nearby.

Again the report offers no evidence suggesting that there were any "Taliban" killed in the strike, in contrast to the first airstrike.

By these signal omissions, aimed at avoiding the most damaging facts in the incident, the report confirms that no insurgent fighters were killed in the airstrikes which killed very large numbers of civilians. The report thus belies a key propaganda line that the US command had maintained from the beginning - that the Taliban had deliberately prevented people from moving from their houses so that civilian casualties would be maximized.

As recently as June 3, the spokesperson for the US command in Afghanistan, Lieutenant Commander Christine Sidenstricker, was still telling the website Danger Room that "civilians were killed because the Taliban deliberately caused it to happen" and that the "Taliban" had "forced civilians to remain in places they were attacking from".

The central contradiction between the report and the US military's "human shields" argument was allowed to pass unnoticed in the extremely low-key news media coverage of the report.

News coverage of the report has focused either on the official estimate of only 26 civilian deaths and the much larger number of Taliban casualties or on the absence of blame on the part of US military personnel found by the investigators.

The Associated Press reported that the United States had "accidentally killed an estimated 26 Afghan civilians last month when a warplane did not strictly adhere to rules for bombing".

The New York Times led with the fact that the investigation had called for "additional training" of US air crews and ground forces but did hold any personnel "culpable" for failing to follow the existing rules of engagement.

None of the news media reporting on the highly expurgated version of the investigation pointed out that it had confirmed, in effect, the version of the event that had been put forward by residents of the bombed villages.

As reported by the New York Times on May 6, one of the residents interviewed by phone said six houses had been completely destroyed and that the victims of the bombing "were rushing to go to their relative's houses where they believed they would be safe, but they were hit on the way".