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## Afghans Say NATO Strikes Killed Civilians

By ROD NORDLAND

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KABUL, Afghanistan — NATO officials acknowledged preliminary reports that four to a dozen or more civilians were killed in a coalition airstrike Thursday in Nangarhar Province. Afghan accounts put the civilian deaths as high as 32.

A statement from the international forces confirmed that they had mounted an operation with Afghan forces in the area to search for a Taliban commander, and killed 2 senior Taliban leaders as well as 15 to 20 other insurgents. As the forces left they were fired on from several locations and called in an airstrike to cover their withdrawal, they said.

“Coalition forces deeply regret that our joint operation appears to have resulted in civilian loss of life and we express our sincerest condolences to the families,” Rear Adm. Greg Smith, the international force’s director of communication, said in a statement.

At the scene, in the village of Hashim Khail Wadi in the Khogyani district, a reporter for The New York Times counted 12 fresh graves. Residents said that they had just buried civilian victims of the bombing and that a total of 32 people had been killed there and in another village nearby, Nakro Khail, in the Sherzad district.

The victims were said to be in a house in Nakirro Khail and at a ford in Hashim Khail Wadi, where vehicles were blocked by a flood and the drivers had parked, waiting to cross, when the vehicles were rocketed by planes. The attack took place about 4 a.m., the residents said.

President [Hamid Karzai](#) ordered an inquiry. Tolo TV in Kabul quoted local officials putting the civilian death toll at 12.

Hajji Zaman Khairy, a prominent tribal elder in the Khogyani district and a candidate for Parliament, also said 12 civilians were killed, but added that coalition forces captured seven people and killed 14 Afghan and foreign Taliban fighters.

A statement from the international forces said that 10 rocket-propelled grenades and multiple automatic weapons had been found at the scene.

In another case of civilian casualties, Afghan and coalition officials continued to dispute what happened in the Sangin district of Helmand Province on July 26, when United States [Marines](#) fired a missile at a house from which they had received gunfire.

A senior intelligence official for the international forces, speaking on condition of anonymity as a matter of policy because of his position, said that about 6 civilians were killed, as well as Taliban fighters, for a total of 14 deaths. The civilians were killed when the Marines fired a shoulder-mounted Javelin rocket at a house where Taliban had taken up positions on the roof, while keeping civilians trapped inside.

“The Marines were unbelievable in the length of the time they waited to return fire,” the official said, adding that they took fire from the house for more than four hours before the decision to fire the rocket was made.

Afghan officials [had put the death toll at 52 civilians](#), while officials from the international force denied at first that civilians had been killed.

President Karzai sent provincial and local officials to investigate and announced after meeting with them on Wednesday that 39 civilians were killed by the rocket strike on the house, where people had taken refuge from the fighting. The announcement noted, however, that the Taliban had been fighting from the house.

Asked to explain the divergence in accounts, the international force official said, “In Helmand, there are significant political challenges going on, to put it mildly.” In addition,

coalition forces were unable to visit the scene because the Taliban controlled the area, the official said.

The announcement from Mr. Karzai's office said that the president "once again insisted that under any conditions civilian casualties are not acceptable to him."

Elsewhere in [Afghanistan](#) on Thursday, a suicide bomber struck an American and Afghan convoy, killing 11 police officers and wounding seven civilians in northern Kunduz Province, Afghan officials said. None of the Americans were hurt.

The convoy was on a patrol in the Pul-e-Khesti area, in the Imam Sahib district, when the car bomb exploded near the patrol at 7:30 a.m., said Mohammad Ayub Haqyar, the district governor. He said an American armored vehicle was slightly damaged, but no one inside was hurt.

In Helmand Province, a roadside bomb struck a civilian vehicle on Thursday, killing nine civilians, pilgrims preparing for [the hajj](#) to Saudi Arabia.