

AFGHAN FORCES ASKED US SPECIAL FORCES ON THE GROUND IN KUNDUZ TO CALL IN STRIKE ON MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES

As a lot of outlets are reporting, the head of Special Forces in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, just “corrected” the original claims DOD made after the deadly strike on the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz that US Special Forces were being attacked by stating that the Afghans called in the strike, not US forces.

This is supposed to correct the claim US special forces said they were being attacked – made by people all the way up to Defense Secretary Ash Carter:

SEC. CARTER: I want to be careful about what I say, because I don't want to get out in front of the investigation. But I think, Lita, in answer to your question, I think our current understanding, again, understanding that an investigation is going on and early facts can be misleading, is that yes, there was American air action in that area, and that American forces there were engaged in the general vicinity.

And at some point in the course of the events there did report that they, themselves, were coming under attack. That much I think we can safely say, Lita, at this point.

Ultimately, though, the statement changes very little. In his statement, Campbell emphasized that American forces on the ground have the

inherent right to self-defense. And, after several qualifying questions, Campbell finally clarified what his statement didn't make clear but should have: that the Afghans asked Special Forces *on the ground in Kunduz* to call in a strike.

Q: To make it crystal clear: there were no US JTACs, under fire, at the tactical level, when this air strike was called in?

General John Campbell: What I said was that the Afghans asked for air support from a Special Forces team that we have on the ground to train, advise, and assist, in Kunduz. The initial statement that went out was that US Forces were under direct fire contact and what I'm doing is correcting that statement here.

When asked if the Special Forces were *with* the Afghans who claimed to be under fire – and about any Rules of Engagement that should have prevented such an attack – Campbell just said those details would come out later in the investigation.

There are two other details in Campbell's statement that hints at where this is going. First, Campbell said "several civilians were accidentally struck" in an attack purportedly targeting the Taliban. At last count there were at least 22 people killed in the attack, including 3 children. I'm a bit concerned about Campbell's understanding of the word "several."

In addition, Campbell made a human shield argument about the Taliban – softened only slightly from those used over the weekend.

Unfortunately the Taliban have decided to remain in the city and fight from within, knowingly putting civilians at significant risk of harm.

The statement all seems to be more about

shifting blame on the Afghans rather than the US special forces who somehow didn't correct their claim that a hospital was attacking them, and to lay the claim that those same people are just advising Afghans rather than actually fighting. (Campbell is back in DC to testify to Congress, so these claims will become very convenient immediately.)

But overall, the explanation remains the same. US special forces on the ground in Kunduz called in strikes that – in probably 3 attacking passes – took out a hospital.

Update: MSF General Director Christopher Stokes is no more impressed than me.

Today the U.S. government has admitted that it was their airstrike that hit our hospital in Kunduz and killed 22 patients and MSF staff. Their description of the attack keeps changing – from collateral damage, to a tragic incident, to now attempting to pass responsibility to the Afghanistan government. The reality is the U.S. dropped those bombs. The U.S. hit a huge hospital full of wounded patients and MSF staff. The U.S. military remains responsible for the targets it hits, even though it is part of a coalition. There can be no justification for this horrible attack. With such constant discrepancies in the U.S. and Afghan accounts of what happened, the need for a full transparent independent investigation is ever more critical.