

AFGHANISTAN CONFIRMS ELEVEN CHILDREN KILLED IN APRIL 6 NATO AIR STRIKE



Partial screen-grab of the Khaama Press article confirming eleven children were killed in the April 6 NATO air strike in Kunar province. Various reports of the strike include this image as well as other photos taken from slightly different angles of the same group of victims.

Khaama Press reports today that a group of investigators appointed by the Afghan government has confirmed that eleven children were killed on Saturday in a NATO air strike in Kunar Province. Although several press reports indicate that NATO has said that it is investigating the strike, I can find no word on the Defense Department or ISAF websites mentioning this strike. The absence of any report from NATO is puzzling, since their site provides near-daily accounts of actions under the heading of "Joint Command Operational Update".

Here is how Khaama Press relates the confirmation of the deaths:

Head of the Afghan delegation appointed by Afghan president Hamid Karzai to probe NATO airstrike in eastern Kunar province of Afghanistan confirmed at least 11 children and 4 women were killed during raid.

The delegation also added that at least 25 people had suffered casualties during the air raid in this province.

The airstrike was carried out during a joint military operation conducted by Afghan and coalition security forces in Shegal district of eastern Kunar province three days.

The delegation met with the families of the victims after being appointed by president Hamid Karzai.

Two very important details about the strike come in the final paragraph:

At least 7 Taliban militants were also killed during the airstrike, the delegation confirmed adding that 4 residential houses were damaged during the airstrike.

The details that Taliban militants were killed and that more than one house was damaged are important because of the other information that has come out regarding the incident.

The day after the strike, the Washington Post carried an AP article about it. Near the end of the article, AP relayed information that came from a local official:

Afghan officials said the airstrike occurred after a joint U.S.-Afghan force faced hours of heavy gunfire from militants. The joint force was conducting an operation targeting a senior Taliban leader that began around midnight Friday in the Shultan area of Kunar's Shigal district, according to

tribal elder Gul Pasha, who also is the chief of the local council.

The remote area is one of the main points of entry for Taliban and other insurgents trying to move across the mountainous border from neighboring Pakistan, where they enjoy refuge in the lawless northwestern area.

"In the morning after sunrise, planes appeared in the sky and airstrikes started," Pasha said in a telephone interview, adding that the fighting didn't end until the evening.

"I don't think that they knew that all these children and women were in the house because they were under attack from the house and they were shooting at the house," he said.

There were slightly differing accounts of the death toll.

Pasha said the main Taliban suspect was in the house that was hit and was killed along with a woman and the children, ages 1 to 12, who were members of the suspect's family.

So Pasha is claiming that the children all belonged to the main Taliban suspect and were in the same house where he was located. That is very interesting considering that in an article published April 8 that also mentioned this attack, Khaama Press featured a government condemnation of the use of civilians as human shields:

The Afghan government strongly condemned ordinary Afghan civilians being used the human shield during military operations.

Officials in Afghan presidential palace (ARG) warned that civilian casualties during military operations will harm Afghan peace process with the militant groups.

Afghan president deputy spokesperson Adila Raz on Monday said, "The government of Afghanistan strongly condemn the use of civilians as human shields and reiterates that such actions will harm stability and Afghan peace process."

Pasha's claim that the children who died were part of the Taliban suspect's family loses some credibility in light of today's report, since it says the investigating group "met with the families of the victims". This suggests to me that the children did not all come from one family. The fact that multiple houses were hit also provides for the child victims to come from more than one family. That these tragic deaths occurred during a prolonged battle and that Taliban insurgents were killed along with the children does fit with the idea that the militants sought refuge in, and likely even fired on coalition forces from, the houses of civilians with no connection to the insurgency.

The use of human shields is both despicable and a war crime. However, even in the heat of a pitched battle, those carrying out air strikes have the responsibility to make sure civilians are not present when they drop bombs. ISAF commanders in Kunar should have been particularly sensitive to this issue, since a NATO airstrike on March 1 killed another nine young Afghan boys, prompting an official apology from the Department of Defense only two days later:

NATO's International Security Assistance Force released the pre-recorded video this morning, which featured Army Lt. Gen. David M. Rodriguez, commander of ISAF's Joint Command, apologizing for the deaths of the Afghan boys and explaining his troops' actions in the incident.

"I want to offer my sincere apologies for killing nine children...," the general

said. "I want to tell you what happened, not to make an excuse, but rather, because we understand that knowing the facts of a seemingly inconceivable tragedy sometimes helps."

Coalition helicopter pilots mistakenly identified the nine young boys as insurgents based on intelligence reports, Rodriguez said. The boys were chopping wood near a location that reportedly was used by insurgents just hours earlier in a rocket attack on a nearby coalition outpost. One American soldier was wounded in the rocket attack.

"The coalition dispatched two helicopters to the location they were told the attack came from," Rodriguez explained. "The helicopters identified what they thought were insurgents, killing nine, [but] shortly thereafter, we received word that these young men were not insurgents."

An assessment team arrived on the scene immediately following the airstrike and confirmed the accidental killings, he said.

"They were simply boys who had been cutting wood," Rodriguez said. "We had made a terrible mistake."

After over eleven years in Afghanistan, our forces still can't learn from their own mistakes, and it is the Afghan people who pay for these mistakes with their lives.