

“Grab News Headlines, Isolate Bombed Area and Stonewall: U.S. Military’s Virtual Reality about Afghan Civilian Casualties. A Case Study of the U.S. Assault upon Hajiyan”

by

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A growing disconnect exists between the daily reality of war experienced by the common Afghan and how this war is represented to the American general public by the corporate media, many non-governmental organizations favoring “humanitarian interventions” around the globe (e.g., Human Rights Watch), and the U.S. military and its defense minions. The war in Afghanistan – as most other wars beginning with Vietnam – is waged both on the *ground there* and in the *living rooms here*. The recent midnight assault

upon the small village of Hajiyan (also called Alizi) along the Arghandab River in Panjwayi District of Kandahar Province provides a case study to explore this disconnect.¹ No doubt many similar cases exist, but the U.S. military strategy to contain and stonewall succeeded there.

A very graphic way – a picture is worth a thousand words – is simply to contrast photos of how the U.S. military is portrayed with Afghan children. The first photo depicts U.S. Army Capt. John Pritchard of Combined Joint Task Force 16 giving a tee-shirt to a young boy in Panjwayi (from <http://www4.army.mil/cjtf76/picture.php?id=21>). Another type of interaction is shown in the second photo: the legacy of “precision fire” by A-10 Warthog attack jets upon the village of Hajiyan in Panjwayi, revealed on the body of three year-old Mohammad Imran (photo by Noor Khan, A.P.).



¹ Four years ago, I wrote a similar article exploring the attack upon a wedding in Kakarak village, Uruzgan Province. The article was widely reprinted and may be seen in India's foremost weekly magazine, *Frontline*, at: "The massacre at Kakarak. Of arrogance and Pentagon-speak, in the midst of chasing Mullah Omar's shadows and keeping Hamid Karzai in power," *Frontline* 19, 16 (August 16, 2002), at: <http://hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1916/19160660.htm>



Both pictures are “true” and neither one alone represents reality. Both illustrate two images of modern war: the war to win hearts and minds and the war to kill the enemy. They are inseparable. But every effort will be made to keep images like that of Imran off pages and screens of America because the wars the U.S. carries out are represented as being the “good fights” where only the bad guys die in a hail of “precision” bombs and rockets... “in the rockets red glare.”

On the other hand, the case of Imran was front-page news in the major national daily of our neighbor to the north on May 23rd (an impossible event in the United States where news about civilian casualties at best gets buried in pages twenty to thirty).

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The district of Panjwayi along with neighboring Maywand has long been a stronghold of the Taliban. Some of the first U.S. bombing attacks by the fearsome U.S. flying gunship, the AC-130 (which was also involved in the attack on the wedding in Kakarak on July 1, 2002) were carried out in the Panjwayi district. On October 16, 2001, 8-9 Afghan civilians perished in such an attack by an AC-130 when a home collapsed on its

inhabitants.² Two months later, the Taliban surrendered Kandahar without a fight and dissipated into the mountains and countryside, returning to their Pashtun villages like in the Panjwayi district.

In five years very little has changed in the small mud brick villages of Panjwayi. Hajiyan sill has no electricity and its water comes from a well. The village comprises some 30-35 large mud brick compounds, each housing an extended family of up to 50 persons. The district has been an area of continued intermittent conflict between Taliban insurgents and U.S. occupation forces and their Afghan allies. In April 2004, insurgents attacked the Afghan non-governmental organization, Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA), killing two CHA workers and an Afghan soldier. In October 2005, insurgents on motorcycles rode up to the Khanjakak high school in the Panjwai district and gunned down the outspoken anti-Taliban school headmaster in broad daylight in front of students. Hours later, gunmen attacked a nearby primary school and shot dead a guard. The direct result of such insurgent attacks was to close schools and to severely limit humanitarian assistance, precisely the insurgents' intended outcome.³

Four years into the insurgency, public patience in Panjwayi District has largely dissipated. The insurgency here (as elsewhere) is fed by frustration with a corrupt and impotent Afghan government that has failed to improve the lives of common people. The Christian Science Monitor reported recently that villagers from Panjwayi say they are as frightened of the police who regularly raid their homes and strip them of their meager valuables, as they are of the Taliban militants.⁴

During the week before the massacre at Hajiyan, fierce fighting had erupted in the Panjwayi District. The fighting broke out when Afghan and Canadian forces went to the

² Details in my data base, "'A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States' Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Accounting," available at <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mw/herold>

³ For details on the armed conflict dynamics, see my essay "U.S. Military Strategy to Maintain Afghanistan as an 'Empty Space': The Perfect Neo-colonial State of the 21st Century. Part Four," Cursor.org (March 18, 2006) at <http://www.cursor.org/stories/emptyspace4.html>

⁴ Rachel Morarjee, "Security Slipping around Kandahar. More than 250 people were killed in violence this past week in Afghanistan," Christian Science Monitor (May 23, 2006) at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0523/p04s01-wosc.html>

area based upon “information” that the Taliban had congregated there. Unable to overcome the insurgents, tactical air support was called-in. A Canadian soldier was killed along with three Afghan soldiers, six policemen and at least three civilians.⁵

On Thursday, May 18th the U.S. military (typically an un-named general) and its Afghan proxies in Kabul and Kandahar – in the guise of General Raufi who heads up the Afghan military’s southern region - loudly proclaimed the capture of famed Taliban commander, Mullah Dadullah. The Afghan Army in search of success was finally delivering results. The news headline was splashed across corporate media outlets like the Associated Press and CBS News.⁶ Shortly thereafter, a Taliban spokesperson contacted the western media informing it that he had just spoken with Mullah Dadullah who was somewhere in Kandahar leading the insurgency and seemed in high spirits. But that news was not reported or later prominently corrected, leaving the lingering impression that the fight against the insurgents had scored another success. But, the headline had been grabbed. The war as presented to those on the living room couch was making headway. All the more so since the complicated and disturbing socio-economic realities on the ground in Panjwayi district are never seriously explored.

The context above frames the way the midnight assault upon the village of Hajiyan is constructed and represented to the American public. On Monday, May 22nd news headlines uncritically paraded the following:

"I can confirm there was a coalition air strike against a known Taliban stronghold near the village of Azizi in the Panjwayi district and we believe more than 50 Taliban have been killed in the operation," coalition spokesman Major Scott Lundy told AFP.... The attack occurred late Sunday and early Monday on the village of Azizi in Panjwayi district, Kandahar province, said a coalition spokesman, Maj. Scott Lundy. "It was

⁵ “Taliban Commander Caught, Afghan Rebel Toll Nears 200,” Agence France Press (May 19, 2006)

⁶ for example by CBS News in “Key Taliban Leader Captured?” CBS News (May 19, 2006) and Noor Khan, “General: Militant May be Taliban Leader,” Associated Press Online (May 19, 2006)

against a known Taliban stronghold and we believe it resulted in about 50 Taliban killed," he said.

Some hours later, the U.S. military explained

Air strikes were used to destroy a large enemy weapons cache and several Taliban compounds.

Had injured Afghan civilians not been able to flee seeking medical care in nearby Kandahar, the “news” would have stopped there. U.S. and their Afghan proxy forces immediately close off all access to bombed sites as a means of controlling information, that is, to manage what gets beamed to those on the couch. In most instances, the mainstream American corporate media cooperates.

But the devastating aerial attacks by A-10 Warthog attack jets firing their 30 mn General Electric cannon (the size of a Volkswagen⁷) took place between 11 P.M. and 5 A.M. and injured persons headed towards the hospitals of Kandahar. A report in the Melbourne Herald Sun described the exodus,

“bleeding and burnt children, women and men started arriving at Kandahar hospital early yesterday. They were ferried by truck, taxi and minibus – any vehicle that withstood the coalition bombardment of their village in southern Afghanistan...only those who could find a working vehicle had been able to make the 35 km journey to Kandahar for help, with many left behind...”⁸

Given that injured Afghans and accompanying family members were talking to the independent press like Reuters, Pajhwok Afghan News, and the Afghan Islamic Press,

⁷ see my “Uranium Wars: The Pentagon Steps up its Use of Radioactive Munitions,” Cursor.org (November 13, 23002) at <http://www.cursor.org/stories/uranium.htm>

⁸ “Bombs Take Heavy Toll,” Melbourne Herald Sun (May 23, 2006)

damage control was needed. It was found with the governor of Kandahar, a Karzai appointee, Asadullah Khalid, issuing a statement that 16 Afghan civilians had also perished in the village of Azizi (sic). But the new “spin” was all too obvious:

"These sort of accidents happen during fighting, especially when the Taliban are hiding in homes," Kandahar Gov. Asadullah Khalid told reporters. "I urge people not to give shelter to the Taliban."⁹

In other words, the American warplanes are exonerated and blame is put on the very victims of the aerial attack. The governor, formerly governor of Ghazni, is close to Afghan warlord and strongman Abdul al-Rasul Sayyaf and to the U.S.¹⁰

At that point, the news circulating worldwide admitted some civilian casualties but a much larger number (80) of dead Taliban. Asadullah soon added during an emergency press conference that he had received “intelligence reports” that insurgents were hiding and meeting in the village. The U.S. jets attacked the hideouts but the militants allegedly fled into a “populated area.”

My noon time on Monday, the official story was being put in doubt as more independent-minded reporters began interviewing injured villagers at Kandahar’s Mir Wais hospital. Saeed Zabuli of *Pajhwok Afghan News* filed a story, “Dozens Killed as Coalition Planes Pound Areas in Kandahar,” in which he names injured civilians and quotes their stories. Nasrat Shoib of Agence France Press and Robert Birsell of Reuters soon add further graphic detail: Atta Mohammad, a village elder, tells Shoib that 24 members of his family were killed in the night time bombing; a wounded boy, Daad Mohammad, says to Birsell from his hospital bed that all seven of his family members were killed. A Xinhua reporter also speaks with Atta Mohammad who says

⁹ in KARE-TV (Minneapolis), “U.S. Forces Hit Taliban Enclave” dated May 22, 2006 citing a news wire report by Noor Khan of the Associated Press, at: http://www.kare11.com/news/national/national_article.aspx?storyid=125322

¹⁰ Asadullah Khalid is linked with Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf’s political-military faction Tanzim-e Dahwat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan, formerly known as Ittihad-e Islami-ye Afghanistan. A photo of Asadullah with his U.S. protectors may be seen at: <http://www.defendamerica.mil/articles/Dec2004/a120704d.html>

Over 50 people, 26 of them in one family...were killed in the bombardments carried out by foreign aircraft and 17 wounded people including women and children have been taken to Mir Wais hospital in Kandahar city...I could bring 10 seriously injured members of my family to the hospital.”

Xinhua News mentioned that Abdul Qayum Pukhla, head of the hospital confirmed the admission of 17 wounded persons into the hospital by Monday afternoon.

Further damage control was called-for. It appeared in a story filed by the Associated Press’ Noor Khan from Kandahar who cited an injured 40-year-old man in the hospital, Haji Ikhlaf who said insurgents had been hiding in the Islamic madrassa religious school in the village after fierce fighting in recent days, adding

Helicopters bombed the madrassa and some of the Taliban ran from there into people’s homes. Then those homes were bombed...I saw 35 to 40 dead Taliban and around 50 dead or wounded civilians.¹¹

Khan also quoted another survivor from the village, Zurmina Bibi, who was cradling her injured 8-month-old baby and said about 10 people were killed in her home including 3-4 children. In Bibi’s words

There were dead people everywhere.

The ever-compliant governor of Kandahar, Asadullah Khalid added that the fleeing Taliban “...used people’s houses as their trenches. They (the 16 civilians) were killed in the bombardment.” As expected, Human Rights Watch’s Sam Zarifi put forth the same

¹¹ Noor Khan (Associated Press), “Coalition Air Strike Kills about 50 in Afghanistan,” The Globe and Mail (2:04 AM EDT May 22, 2006) at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20060522.wtaliban0522/BNStory/Afghanistan/home>

line which was printed in the Washington Post, a favorite outlet of the defense intellectuals.¹²

But Nasrat Shoib would soon sound another discordant note by citing more stories of the injured at Mir Wais hospital. A young man sitting next to his wounded brother said, “sixteen people were either killed or wounded only in my family.”¹³ But the most damaging account was by an 18-year-old with wounds to his face and chest who said *there had been Taliban in the village but they disappeared when the bombs began to fall*. A teenager, Azizullah adding that he had seen scores of dead and wounded on his way to the hospital said, “one [projectile] hit my house. I was wounded and two of my brothers were killed.”

The report that the Taliban had quickly fled the village was further supported by a 45-year-old man, Nasratullah, who spoke with Nasrat Shoib. He was having dinner with his in-laws when

Suddenly the bombardment started – there was big fire in our place. I managed to escape but I don’t know what happened to my in-laws.”

No mention of Taliban any where. Indeed, the likelihood that the Taliban would seek to hide behind civilians goes against basic understanding of guerrilla warfare. A key strength of the insurgents is having the support of the local population, which cannot be jeopardized by reckless action.

Shoib noted

The area was sealed off by foreign and Afghan troops, said Mohammad, who had brought some of his wounded relatives including women and

¹² Jason Straziuso, “Karzai Orders Probe into U.S. Airstrike,” Washington Post (May 23, 2006) at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/23/AR2006052300292_pf.html

¹³ In Nasrat Shoib, “50 Taliban, 16 Civilians Killed in Afghanistan Air Raid,” Agence France Presse (May 22, 2006) at <http://archive.turkishpress.com/news.asp?id=124739>

children to the hospital. A doctor said security forces had not allowed ambulances into the area to fetch the wounded.

Did security forces seal off the area around the bombed-out World Trade Center to ambulances?

By early Tuesday morning the London Times was carrying a damaging report, “Civilians Die in Raid on Taleban,” using information provided the day before by Agence France Presse, again quoting Atta Mohammad, 60, his silver beard streaked with tears and his hands covered in blood, his voice crackling with emotion

“Oh my God, they killed my kids...God may take revenge on them. They took everyone from me.”¹⁴

By May 23rd, the Agence France Presse was reporting “Concern Mounts over Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan.”¹⁵ It had taken forty-eight hours for the topic of civilian deaths caused by the U.S. attacks to reach the headlines. The AFP story added that

a teacher in nearby Tulakhan village told AFP by telephone that he saw the bodies of 40 civilians, including children, and that about 50 others had been wounded. The US-coalition said up to 80 suspected Taliban had died in the raid targeting Azizi village in Panjwayi, adding it was investigating claims of civilian casualties. The teacher, named Abdullah, said he had assisted in burying 28 people and saw the bodies of 12 others being returned to their home village from other areas. Eight houses in his village were destroyed in the bombing, several damaged and scores of animals were killed, he said from the area, which was still off-limits to journalists.

¹⁴ Tim Albone, “Civilians Die in Raid on Taliban,” <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-2192240,00.html>

Times Online (May 23, 2006) at

¹⁵ “Concern Mounts Over Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan,” Agence France Presse (May 23, 2006 at 1:45 AM ET) at <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines06/0523-03.htm>

Other residents told AFP at the main hospital in Kandahar city on Monday that they had seen scores of dead and wounded.

Any hope of containing and re-scripting the story about the massacre at Hajiyan was dashed when Canada's premier daily, The Globe and Mail, published a major front page story on May 23rd with the blaring headlines, "Bombs Kill Afghan Villagers" with a large colored photo of three-year old, Mohammad Imran, lying in Mir Wais hospital with his lower torso covered in bandages.

The Melbourne Herald Sun contributed a scathing comment by a 38-year-old who was waiting outside Mir Wais hospital for word on the fate of his wounded cousin

It was relentless. It was exactly the same as when the Russians were bombing us.¹⁶

As the hours on Tuesday passed, further details on civilian casualties emerged. Jim Farrell penned a piece "Afghan Villagers say Canadians Must Share Blame for Deadly Air Attack," printed in the Edmonton Journal.¹⁷ The U.S midnight air assault was alleged to be undoing the Canadians work at winning hearts and minds. He quoted Fida Mohammad, an injured father of eight who said Canadian troops will share the blame for the onslaught that put him, his wife and two of his children in the hospital,

We cannot tell the difference between Canadian and American soldiers.

They are all Americans to us. They have been very cruel to us.

Later Fida Mohammed would elaborate saying that when he heard the bombing, he went outside, and was immediately hurt,

¹⁶ "Bombs Take Heavy Toll," Melbourne Herald Sun (May 23, 2006) at <http://www.e-ariana.com/ariana/eariana.nsf/0/14A16D9A928D94D087257177005A2261?OpenDocument>

¹⁷ Jim Farrell, "Afghan Villagers Say Canadians must share Blame for Deadly Air Attack," Edmonton Journal (May 23, 2006) at <http://www.canada.com/topics/news/national/story.html?id=0eale751-aa8f-4b03-9fbe-b2534a2987f7&k=33254>

"When I came out from my home there was an exchange of fire, but at once I was wounded," said Mohammad, whose head and right arm was heavily bandaged. "My whole family came out weeping and crying. When I came into my senses I was told they were wounded, too. "My sons, my daughters, I don't know if they're alive. "I don't remember anything very well. It was just like a dream. "What did we do? We are innocent people." Villagers were just trying to escape when the bomb fell, said Mohammed Sadiq. "When they saw the helicopter and when they heard firing they came out and most of them were hurt," he said.¹⁸

Farrell also pointed to a rising civilian death toll,

Within the decrepit walls of Mirwais hospital, the estimated toll of innocent dead soared as Monday wore on. Pointing to one 14-year-old boy in the intensive care unit, villagers said Said Rahim's family included a total of 22 people Sunday morning. "There's only him left," Rahim's uncle Mohammad Agha said, as he pointed at the chest wound that he claimed almost made the boy his family's 22nd and final victim.

Geoffrey York added more detail in Canada's Globe and Mail,

With puffy face and red eyes, 12-year-old Mahmood was still fighting back tears as he told his story yesterday. He had gotten the news in a phone call at dawn. His entire family -- mother, father, three sisters, three brothers -- had been killed by a coalition bombing attack on his village near Kandahar. "I lost my family," he whispered between his sobs. "Now I am all alone." Nearby, in an intensive-care hospital bed, his unconscious three-year-old cousin was twitching and panting for air. He, too, was a

¹⁸ Bob Weber, "Air Strike Kills 80 Rebels in Southern Afghanistan: 16 Civilians Also Die," CBC News (May 22, 2006 at 12:14 EDT)

victim of the bombing. Two of his uncles were being treated in the same ward, both badly wounded, one in a coma.¹⁹

Another survivor, Mohammed Rafiq, 23, a farmer suffered injuries to his head and arm when his mud-brick house was hit by a bomb. The Taliban were 30 meters away when the U.S. bomb landed on his home. He also said the bombs caused enormous damage, noting “I don’t have anything left. Another farmer, Azizullah, 30, said three members of his family had been killed. Another villager, Taj Muhammad, said two of his brothers were killed and other family members injured.²⁰ The scenes at Kandahar’s Mir Wais Hospital are captured in the following photos:



Photo #1

¹⁹ Geoffrey York, “Bombs Kill Afghan Villagers,” *The Globe and Mail* (May 23, 2006) at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20060523.AFGHAN23/TPStory/TPInternational/Asia/>

²⁰ from Ruhullah Khapalwak, “U.S. Airstrike at Taliban Kills Civilians, Afghans Say,” *New York Times* (May 23, 2006) at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/23/world/asia/23afghan.html?_r=1&oref=slogin



Photos # 2 and 3



Photo #4



Photo #5

In the end, the efforts by the U.S. military and the mainstream corporate press to manage the news failed because the bombed area could not be isolated and contained. The brave Afghan civilians who desperately sought care in Mir Wais Hospital were a genie which could not be put back into the bottle of Pentagon “news management.” The intrepid

reporting by Nasrat Shoib of Agence France Presse and Robert Birsell of Reuters brought their stories before the eyes of the world in such a way that other news media were obliged to follow. The U.S. military could stonewall no more when headlines in dailies like the Times and the Globe & Mail – though not the Washington Post or the Los Angeles Times - were about civilian casualties. The headlines by Wednesday were no more about dead Taliban and “precision fire” by A-10 Warthogs.

On Tuesday, a humbled Asadullah Khalid, the governor of Kandahar province, met with many of the wounded at the hospital and gave them cash payments, in some cases folding the equivalent of about \$450 into a barely conscious patient's hand.²¹



Hamid Karzai sitting in an A-10 Warthog at Bagram Air Base in 2004

Naturally the perpetrator has offered in a pure public relations gesture, to investigate himself while the usually bleating Karzai emits a mild reprimand (both of which were

²¹ Weber, op. cit.

widely reported throughout the U.S. mainstream corporate press²²). The message to those on the couch is clear: we abide by the law and investigate possible infractions.²³

A reasonable counting of the dead in the village of Hajiyan indicates that at least 35-40 innocent Afghan civilians perished in the hail of “precision fire” by A-10 Warthogs:

Atta Mohammad, 60, says:	24 family members killed
[Daad Mohammad, a boy, possibly related, says]	[7 family members killed]
Azizullah, a teenager says	2 brothers killed
Mahmood, 12, says	8 family members killed
[Taj Muhammad, sp?, related to above, says]	[2 brothers killed]
Zurmina Bibi, mother, says	10 family members killed
Said Rahim, 14, was	The only survivor in a family of 22
Teacher, Abdullah, says	He buried 28 people

The world knows that Zurmina Bibi was right when, crying, she described her village, Haijiya, that early Monday morning

there *were* dead people everywhere.

²² as for example in “Afghan Civilian Deaths Will be Probed to ‘Fullest,’ U.S. Says,” Bloomberg.com (May 24, 2006) at

<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=10000080&sid=aICwwRR2RQy4&refer=asia#> and Carlotta Gall, “Karzai Orders Inquiry into U.S. Airstrike,” International Herald Tribune (May 23, 2006) at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/05/23/news/afghan.php>

²³ the official public relations approach to civilian casualties has a long history, see Edward S. Herman, “Tragic Errors in U.S. Military Policy. Targeting the Civilian Population,” Z Magazine (September 2002) at http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/War_Peace/Tragic_Errors_Military.html

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