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NATO Strike Magnifies Divide on Afghan War

By [STEPHEN FARRELL](#) and [RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr.](#)

KUNDUZ, [Afghanistan](#) — A [NATO](#) airstrike on Friday exploded two fuel tankers that had been hijacked by the [Taliban](#), setting off competing claims about how many among the scores of dead were civilians and raising questions about whether the strike violated tightened rules on the use of aerial bombardment.

Afghan officials said that up to 90 people were killed by the strike near Kunduz, a northern city where the trucks got stuck after militants tried to drive them across a river late Thursday night.

The strike came at a time of intense debate over the Afghan war in both the United States and Europe and after a heavily disputed election that has left Afghanistan tense and, at least temporarily, without credible leaders.

Though there seemed little doubt some of the dead were militants, it was unclear how many of the dead were civilians, and with anger at the foreign forces high here, NATO ordered an immediate investigation.

Recently, Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the top American and NATO commander here, [severely restricted the use of airstrikes](#), arguing that America risked losing the war if it did not reduce civilian casualties.

Underscoring his concern, on Friday he recorded a video message, translated into Dari and Pashto, to be released to Afghan news organizations.

The general began by greeting “the great people of Afghanistan, salaam aleikum.”

“As commander of the International Security Assistance Force, nothing is more important than the safety and protection of the Afghan people,” General McChrystal said in the [brief message](#). “I take this possible loss of life or injury to innocent Afghans very seriously.”

General McChrystal said he had ordered the investigation “into the reasons and results of this attack, which I will share with the Afghan people.”

Two 14-year-old boys and one 10-year-old boy were admitted to the regional hospital here in Kunduz, along with a 16-year-old who later died. Mahboubullah Sayedi, a spokesman for the Kunduz provincial governor, said most of the estimated 90 dead were militants, judging by the number of charred pieces of Kalashnikov rifles found. But he said civilians were also killed.

In explaining the civilian deaths, military officials speculated that local people were conscripted by the Taliban to unload the fuel from the tankers, which were stuck near a river several miles from the nearest

villages.

But some people wounded by the strike said that they had gone to the scene with jerrycans after other people had run through their villages saying that free fuel was available.

“They were just telling us, ‘Come and get the fuel,’ ” Wazir Gul, a 23-year-old farmer, said at the hospital, where he was treated for serious burns on his back. He estimated that hundreds of people from surrounding villages went to siphon fuel from the trucks before the airstrike.

Mr. Gul said his older brother Amir was among the villagers incinerated in the blast. “When the tanker exploded and burned, I knew he was dead,” Mr. Gul said.

The wounded 10-year-old, Shafiullah, who like many Afghans goes by only one name, said he had defied his father’s orders by climbing on the family donkey to join the throng of villagers heading to pick up fuel.

“When I arrived there, I was on the donkey,” Shafiullah, wounded in his arms and legs, said from his hospital bed. “I was not very close. I had not gotten the fuel yet when the bomb landed and the shrapnel injured me.”

German forces in northern Afghanistan under the NATO command called in the attack, and German military officials initially insisted that no civilians had been killed. But a Defense Ministry spokesman in Berlin later said the ministry believed that more than 50 fighters had been killed but could give no details about civilian casualties.

The public health officer for Kunduz Province, Dr. Azizullah Safar, said a medical team sent to the village reported that 80 people had been killed, and he said that “most of them were civilians and villagers.”

But he said it was also clear that some of the dead were militants, noting that the site was scattered with remnants of ammunition vests and other gear carried by insurgents.

A statement issued by the office of the Afghan president, [Hamid Karzai](#), said that he was “deeply saddened” and that he had sent a delegation to investigate. “Targeting civilian men and women is not acceptable,” the statement added.

Afghan officials said the attack struck a collection of hamlets known as Omar Kheil, near the border of the districts of Char Dara and Ali Abad. The district governor of Ali Abad, Hajji Habibullah, said the area was controlled by Taliban commanders.

The Kunduz area was once calm, but much of it has recently slipped under the control of insurgents at a time when the Obama administration has sent thousands of more troops to other parts of the country to combat an insurgency that continues to gain strength in many areas.

The region is patrolled mainly by NATO’s 4,000-member German force, which is barred by German leaders from operating in combat zones farther south. The United States has 68,000 troops in Afghanistan, more than any other nation; other countries fighting under the NATO command have a combined total of about 40,000 troops here.

If a high number of civilian casualties is confirmed, it is likely to not only deepen antipathy toward NATO

forces in Afghanistan, but also further diminish support for the war in Germany, [where it is already unpopular](#). It could also become an issue in the coming German election as Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) tries to win a second term.

A senior NATO official who had watched aerial surveillance video of the attack site said the Germans who ordered the strike “had every reason to believe what they were looking at was groups of insurgents offloading tankers,” a process that went on for several hours.

The official said that the nearest villages were two miles away and that the authorities “don’t know yet” whether the attack violated the rules governing the use of airstrikes tightened this summer by General McChrystal.

According to the new rules, airstrikes are, in most cases, allowed only to prevent American and other coalition troops from being overrun by enemy fighters. Even in the case of active firefights with Taliban forces, airstrikes are to be limited if the combat is taking place in populated areas.

From initial accounts given by NATO and Afghan officials, it was not clear whether this strike met those conditions, regardless of whether the majority of the dead were insurgents or civilians.

On Friday, Foreign Secretary David Miliband of Britain called for a “prompt and urgent investigation.”

“It is a vital time for NATO and Afghanistan’s people to come together,” he told Sky News.

Stephen Farrell reported from Kunduz, Afghanistan and Richard A. Opiel, Jr., from Kabul, Afghanistan. Reporting was contributed by Abdul Waheed Wafa from Kabul; Sultan M. Munadi from Kunduz; Judy Dempsey from Berlin; and Sharon Otterman from New York.

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