Globe Focus

'In Afghanistan, where is the truth?'

With politics and financial compensation at play, counting the dead has become a controversial science

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Kandahar — From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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Abdullah Shah weeps as he tells the story of Oct. 24, 2006. "Allah saved saved me," he says. "But I wish I was killed that night too, with my family."

The tragedy that struck them also drew Mr. Shah into the complex, controversial business that counting Afghanistan's civilian dead has become.

The white-bearded Afghan farmer, who is in his 70s, recalls his family that night preparing and enjoying a feast for Eid, the end of the Ramadan fast. "We were eating sweets, cookies, milk," he says.

But fighting broke out between coalition forces and the Taliban near their village of mud huts, Zangabad, in the Panjwai region 35 kilometres southwest of Kandahar.

Fatefully, Mr. Shah decided his relatives should seek refuge.

"I told all my family to go out from the village and stay near the nomad tents on the south side," the old man says. He would stay behind and face what might come.

Hours later, after a long firefight, air strikes were called in. But the bombs didn't hit the family's compound – instead, they fell on the nomads' tents. Mr. Shah's one surviving male heir broke the news hours later: "My son who is alive came and told me that my family was completely killed."

At least 50 people died, perhaps 30 of them civilians, including Mr. Shah's wife of 40 years, four of his adult sons and many of his grandchildren – part of the grim and growing tally of "collateral damage" in Afghanistan.

But calculating casualties here is not an exact science: Politics, military strategy and money all play a large part. The Americans are usually accused of low-balling the number of civilian dead, the Afghans of exaggerating.

Observers say Taliban fighters now seek out human shields, in hopes of drawing air attacks. For the insurgents, civilian deaths are a small price to pay for the popular backlash they inspire.

The Taliban's message thrives amid stories of Afghans slain by infidel "crusaders."

Take for instance an American air strike in May that went terribly awry. As Taliban gunmen pinned down Afghan soldiers, the U.S. forces mentoring the fledgling army called in planes that dropped two 2,000-pound bombs along with lesser munitions.

Dozens of fighters were killed, but so were a large number of non-combatants. Afghan President Hamid Karzai rushed to the province of Farah, near the scene in Bala Baluk, to announce he would compensate relatives of 140 civilian victims.

The Pentagon said it could only confirm 26 civilian dead, with at least 78 insurgents killed.

That amounts to a fivefold difference in body counts – between allies.

DECLARED DEAD, AFGHANS LATER FOUND ALIVE

A human-rights investigator in Kabul, while explaining the gritty mechanics of air-strike postmortems, pauses for a rhetorical question: "In Afghanistan," he asks, "where is truth?"

He is venting. "We've interviewed some people who are supposed to be dead," he says. "And they are very much alive. Half of them are working in Iran."

The investigator, who requests anonymity due to the sensitive nature of his work, is employed by a non-governmental organization that tasks him with trying to figure out the true number of civilian dead after air strikes – a growth industry, given how commonplace and controversial such deaths have become in Afghanistan.

Investigators for coalition forces and the Kabul government, along with those from NGOs, rush to the scenes of tragedies to compete to reach the definitive assessments. The only certainty is that each side will interpret the information to their advantage.

Air strikes usually occur in remote communities and religious custom compels people to bury their dead by sundown and keep strangers away from the graves. Such villages are hostile to outlanders at the best of times. Some regard the Taliban as native sons.

As a result, many investigation teams can stay on the ground for only a few hours, canvassing hospitals and checking claims against what paltry records may be available.

Meanwhile, the Afghan government usually compensates families $2,000 (U.S.) per relative killed. In a country without central records and an $800 per capita gross domestic product, that amounts to a huge incentive to pad the numbers.

"I don't blame them, because they're dirt poor," says the NGO human-rights investigator. He is more critical of the country's president, Mr. Karzai. "Because it's an election year, he wants to dole out as much cash as he can – the more the merrier as far as he's concerned."

The sheer destructive power of modern munitions makes the numbers even harder to confirm. "The villagers claim the rest of the 70 or 80 or 90 who died were obliterated by a 2,000-pound bomb, and they

became a pink mist," the investigator says. "Or they were just shredded and they dumped all the parts in the graves."

Such skepticism, he hastens to say, should not detract from the essential tragedy of these events: Families lose breadwinners, children are orphaned, and homes are destroyed – an impact that may last for generations.

REPORT KEPT SECRET FOR 'OPERATIONAL SECURITY'

What went wrong that night in 2006 is an official secret. The Afghan National Army and NATO put together a joint report, but for reasons of "operational security," its contents have never been divulged.

Even for NATO, piecing together events was difficult. Fighting had raged across several villages. Afghan military were leading the charge, but international military were also involved. Some were apparently Special Forces, accustomed to operating in strict secrecy.

The statements that were released for public consumption attribute the civilian casualties only to "breakdowns in communication" between international forces and "local authorities who knew that the nomads had moved into the surrounding fields."

Allied forces are well aware that such blunders cost them dearly in the estimation and loyalty of the Afghan public. In June, NATO's new commander, General Stanley McChrystal, told the U.S. Senate that he was changing the yardstick for success. "The measure of effectiveness will not be enemy killed," he said. "It will be the number of Afghans shielded from violence."

It's a tall order, as more bystanders have been slain every year the war has worn on. Improvised bombs, the Taliban's calling card, killed at least 725 Afghan civilians in 2008, according to the United Nations. Yet coalition bombings didn't lag that far behind: Air strikes killed at least 552 Afghan civilians that year.

Canada oversees Kandahar Province for NATO, but the Canadian Forces have no warplanes in the theatre and frequently allow allies to operate on the ground. Right after the 2006 air strike, Prime Minister Stephen Harper told reporters no Canadian soldiers were involved in the tragedy.

However, Mr. Harper may not have been fully briefed: Military sources confirm that Canadian soldiers fired artillery from a nearby mountainside base and offered up drone surveillance to support the operations. It was a peripheral role, but a role.

Canadians also witnessed the cleanup. At dawn, Afghans from surrounding villages came to collect the dead. Soldiers recall villagers showing up to the scene in "borrowed" police and army uniforms – in hopes that would amount to protective coloration.

Villagers still speak of finding the disembodied hands of small children – hennaed for the Eid celebration – in the rubble. The bodies and body parts were collected into the backs of civilian vehicles, en route to being buried.

One Canadian checkpoint logged the cargo of one vanload. It included two children under five, one decapitated, and nine adult Afghans, including women with missing limbs. A bag of body parts was also seen.

The soldiers also logged the presence of "one elderly male" who claimed that "18 of his family members had been killed."

At first NATO said only a dozen civilians were killed in the air strikes. But later it revised this: "We believe the number to be around 30, or roughly the same number as, or slightly more than, insurgents killed."

NATO also said that corrective measures were taken to prevent events from repeating themselves. Yet the errors and explanations bear some striking similarities to those that would occur again three years later, following this spring's deadly air strike in Bala Baluk.

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"The inability to discern the presence of civilians and assess the potential collateral damage of those strikes is inconsistent with the U.S. government's objective of providing security and safety for the Afghan people," reads the Pentagon's declassified June, 2009, summary.

COMPENSATION INCLUDED A NEW HOME – AND WIFE

President Karzai called Mr. Shah a couple of days after the air strikes promising to help, and the president was true to his word. He gave the old man land, a new house, and sent his young, partly paralyzed daughter for treatment in Germany. He even helped the septuagenarian arrange an expensive dowry for a new, young wife – who has since given birth to a baby daughter.

Premium amounts of compensation money were also awarded. "Yes, it is true that Karzai pays $4,000 for each martyr and $1,000 for each injured person," Mr. Shah says. Kabul even funded a pilgrimage to Mecca for the old man and other bereaved elders from the community.

All of this helped with the widower's grief, he says, but only "a little." Nothing has stopped the depression and nightmares.

While his rags-to-riches story is famous in Afghanistan, some details shift amid retellings. Specifically, the number of dead relatives seems to fluctuate between 18 and 22.

Asked to name the dead, Mr. Shah has trouble recalling the daughters-in-law and some of the grandchildren. "I forgot their names," he says, explaining they "were small and women."

He denies that any insurgent fighters were killed in the strikes on the nomad tents that night.

In any case, the bombing did little to scrub his village clean of Taliban. Today, the insurgents control the Panjwai more than ever. Many villagers have fled and never come back. Even Mr. Shah lives in the city now.

The old farmer says his heart has hardened against both the Taliban and NATO. "No one is a friend of our country," he says. "Both are enemies."

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Counting the fatalities of war: more, or less?

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PETER JAMES SPIELMANN THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
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NEW YORK -- War is hell, it's long been said. But just how hellish it can be is a more difficult question, judging from disputes among researchers at several highly respected international peace institutes. They cannot agree on whether war is becoming more or less deadly -- or even on how to count the dead.

These experts snipe at each other in academic journals and papers and are engaged in a statistical arms race of their own -- sampling, adding and modifying databases to try to shed light on questions that have implications beyond the academic world. The disagreements begin with how fatalities are counted and then diverge more widely.

Authors from PRIO, the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway, in collaboration with Sweden's Uppsala University, say that since the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of East-West rivalry in 1989, civil wars, "though often intractable and devastating, have produced fewer battle deaths than their Cold War counterparts."

They relied on estimates by demographers, historians and epidemiologists, supplemented by figures from the media, governments and nongovernmental groups. Omitting "one-sided violence increases" -- such as the Rwanda genocide, along with deaths from disease, hunger and "criminal and unorganized violence" -- PRIO arrived at a total of some 10 million battlefield deaths from 1946 to 2002 in conflicts where at least one warring party was a government.

Way too low, countered Harvard Medical School team researcher Dr. Ziad Obermeyer, working with colleagues at the University of Washington and at the Gates Foundation-funded Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. His group reconsidered the PRIO numbers in the light of World Health Survey sample interviews in 13 conflict-ridden countries, where the U.N. asked families how many relatives they lost to war from 1955 to 2002. It found that the true body count over a half-century was at least three times higher than PRIO's tally.

Their method, relying on memories of family members, allows for retrospective study of countries where census and death records have been disrupted by war and researchers cannot safely go into the countryside, Obermeyer said.

"Rather than uncritically taking data as they are reported from the field, we are actually using random samples of populations to look backward at how many relatives of respondents were killed, and then using standard statistical methods to extrapolate and get a number for the whole population," he said.

But the death toll also can be counted in other ways that drive it astronomically higher.

Going beyond direct battlefield casualties and counting the victims of genocide, deliberate famines, death camps and other warlike actions raises the tally to 41 million people slain since the end of World War II, said Milton Leitenberg, a senior researcher at the University of Maryland's School for International and Security Studies.

He extends his count of victims of war and conflict back to the dawn of the 20th century, producing an appalling total of 231 million. Leitenberg says his figures for mass casualties are the most widely accepted totals based on statistics by U.N. agencies and humanitarian and human-rights groups. But he concedes that such figures can be colored by politics.

What Leitenberg rejects is using only government-reported or one-sided battle fatalities -- which would omit more than 70 million deaths from executions, repression and starvation in Stalin's Soviet reign of terror and the politically engineered Ukraine famine, Hitler's genocidal campaign against the Jews and Mao Zedong's "Great Leap Forward" from 1959 to 1961.

"It's basically a flawed construct, which gives you perhaps 10 percent of the real total," Leitenberg said.

Obermeyer also complained the PRIO methodology takes a limited view, excluding "deaths that are violent but occur when both sides don't have guns

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that sort of one-sided violence."

"I don't think its reasonable to not include those kinds of deaths in counts of war deaths," he added. Andrew Mack, a former U.N. planning expert and now director of the Human Security Report Project at Canada's Simon Fraser University, believes that battle deaths and indirect civilian deaths are both on the decline, backing PRIO's thesis.

His project judges the total number of battle deaths from 1946 to 2007 to be 10,095,152 -- to be precise -- using PRIO figures from the period 1946 to 2001 and data commissioned from Uppsala University for 2002 to 2007.

Mack supports Leitenberg's idea of trying to count all deaths, but he said "census data are often unreliable in poor countries and often very out of date. As for mortality surveys, there are extraordinarily few of these -- and Milton [Leitenberg] doesn't cite them. So his totals are sometimes just battle deaths and sometimes battle deaths plus guesstimates of 'indirect' deaths.'"

How the deaths are counted can lead to wild differences in totals. The Bangladesh/East Pakistan war of 1971 provides a glimpse of how these four systems come up with disparate results:

- PRIO/Uppsala tallied 58,000 soldiers and civilians killed in combat.
- Obermeyer's Harvard/WHO survey calculated 269,000 "violent war deaths."
- Leitenberg's Cornell paper cited 1 million civilians and 500,000 military killed.
- Human Security Report counted 53,500 "battle-deaths on home soil." Mack and other backers of the PRIO theory of decreasing war deaths criticize the Harvard study for opening its timeline with 1955. That skews the trend, they say.

Mack also contends that the 13 conflicts cited by Obermeyer and Harvard were "a small minority of war-affected countries over this period. It is not possible to draw any conclusions from global trends with such a small sample."

Nils Peter Gleditsch of PRIO, one of the authors of the "declining mortality" study, said Harvard's "time frame excludes the Korean War, not to speak of World Wars I and II. Including these wars makes the decline in battle deaths even clearer." It also cuts out the huge death toll in China's civil war between Communists and the Nationalists.

Obermeyer responded that "I wouldn't base any trends on a cataclysmic event, like 1945 and World War II." He said his study began with 1955 because there are too few survivors of earlier conflicts to build a statistically significant sample.

Mack says both battle deaths and indirect civilian casualties are shrinking because "their major drivers, the number and deadliness of wars, have both shrunk. Plus -- and this is critical -- humanitarian assistance per displaced person has increased fivefold since the end of the Cold War, and become more cost-effective."

Ultimately, as Obermeyer said, "there's always going to be uncertainty."