

## THE AFGHAN MISSION: CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

**Grieving father decries troops' judgment****Investigation launched after Canadian soldiers kill young brother and sister in car approaching convoy****GRAEME SMITH**

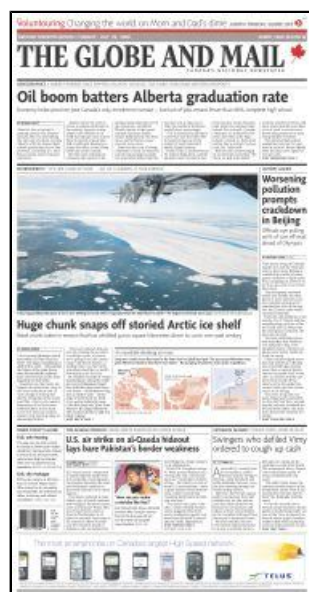
JULY 29, 2008

KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- The father of two children killed by cannon fire from a Canadian troop carrier says he cannot understand how a powerful military could make such a terrible mistake.

Ruzi Mohammed, 31, bundled his family into a rented sedan on Sunday evening for a trip into Kandahar from his home village of Chalgowr, about 10 kilometres southwest of the city.

The car was turning off a dirt road onto the main paved highway in Panjwai district and heading toward a Canadian convoy around 7:30 p.m., when he heard a thundering boom. It was a single shot from a 25-millimetre turret gun, a weapon capable of blasting down concrete walls.

Something hot seared his left ear, he said. Twisting around in the front passenger seat, he saw the destroyed bodies of his son and daughter behind him. His wife remained sitting in the backseat, shocked but not hurt. The hired driver also escaped injury.

**Print Edition - Section Front**[Enlarge Image](#)**More World Stories**

- Stop stalling over repatriation, Emerson told
- The irony of 'bulldozer terrorism'
- U.S. air strike on al-Qaeda hideout lays bare Pakistan's border weakness
- Worsening pollution prompts crackdown in Beijing
- Zimbabwe peace talks break off
- Go to the World section



His daughter Maraka was four years old; his son Tor Jan was two.

"The Canadians say they can see long distances and see very small things from their airplanes," Mr. Mohammed said. "So how can you make a mistake like this? We had women and children in the vehicle. Maybe our driver made a mistake, maybe he drove too fast, but we had five people in the vehicle."

Suicide bombers are typically, but not always, alone in their vehicles.

The Canadian military says the soldiers followed standard procedures for using force to protect themselves against potential threats. A NATO statement said the vehicle was speeding and ignored "hand, arm and audio signals as well as flashing light signals," telling the driver to stop. The vehicle kept going and got within 10 metres of the convoy before the gunner fired.

"We deeply regret this incident," a Canadian military statement said.

Civilian shootings appear to have decreased in 2008 compared with previous years in Kandahar province, a Western human-rights official said, although no statistics were available last night.

When asked why Canadian soldiers have recently achieved success in avoiding such incidents, a military spokeswoman said they're just following the rules.

"We have low incidences of civilian casualties because we are diligent in following our procedures," Captain Sonia Dumouchel-Connock said.

"We are assiduous in our training and in the execution of the mission so as to mitigate and avoid tragic events like this," the spokeswoman added. "We also emphasize the importance of public responsibility and education."

In Ottawa yesterday, Defence Minister Peter MacKay called the deaths "tragic" but said that Canadian soldiers have to make quick decisions in dangerous circumstances. "They're living in a very tense environment with these suicide bombs that have occurred in the past with these approaches. Soldiers have sometimes a split second to make a decision on protecting their fellow soldiers and protecting themselves, protecting fellow civilians," Mr. MacKay told reporters.

"I mean, we grieve each and every time there's a loss including civilians and this is one of these horrible circumstances, a horrible decision that has to be taken."

Military advertisements on radio and billboards warning drivers to stay away from convoys are a common feature of life in Kandahar. But local people usually blame the foreign troops, not the driver, after such incidents.

"They were travelling quickly, yes, because it's very dangerous at night now," said a shopkeeper in Mirwais Minna, a neighbourhood a few kilometres away from the shooting scene. "It's not the driver's fault."

Noor Mohammed, a distant relative of the victims who lives in Kandahar city, said the driver knew that road intimately because he commuted every day from his home in Chalghowr village to work at a shop in the city that sold spare parts for vehicles.

The family believes that the driver tried to stop before reaching the Canadian vehicles but got nervous and stamped his foot on the wrong pedal, the relative said.

"The driver was confused," he said. "He put his foot on the accelerator instead of the brake."

Doctors kept Mr. Mohammed in hospital overnight with minor burns, bruises and other injuries. But he checked himself out yesterday against doctors' advice so he could bury his children promptly, in keeping with Muslim custom.

Weeping at the thought of his lost son and daughter, the father spoke angrily about the foreign troops.

"The Canadians are part of our government now," he said, "but how can they run a government if they are shooting people?"

Canadian military officials say they're now in the process of trying to contact Mr. Mohammed. In previous cases, the military has paid roughly \$2,000 to \$9,000 to victims' families, but the details of the compensation are not released.

The military has previously described the secrecy around compensation as a matter of security for the victims' families, so that they're not targeted by insurgents or criminals.

But a Washington-based group called Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict, whose researchers are examining civilian compensation in Afghanistan, said the incident highlights the need for a more open and accessible system for making such claims.

"This case of the two children killed illustrates a much larger problem," said Sarah Holewinski, CIVIC's executive director, in a statement. "What is this family to do? Where should they turn? Will they receive help because Canada is known to pay compensation? Maybe, maybe not."

A joint investigation into the incident has been launched by Afghan National Police and the Canadian Forces' National Investigation Service, an independent unit of military police that examines all such shootings.

© Copyright 2008 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CTVglobemedia

globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada

M5V 2S9  
Phillip Crawley, Publisher