

## Taliban spurred attack on wedding, Afghan politician says

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KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN — Taliban insurgents in a remote village northeast of Kandahar provoked an attack by coalition troops that devastated a wedding party on Monday and resulted in dozens of civilian deaths, the top politician in Kandahar has told The Globe and Mail.

Ahmed Wali Karzai, chairman of Kandahar's provincial council, said he and his brother, President Hamid Karzai, were told by villagers during a teleconference on Wednesday that between 300 and 350 Taliban fighters invaded Wech Baghtu, a mountain village in the district of Shah Wali Kowt, 60 kilometres northeast of Kandahar city, during the lead-up to a wedding ceremony. Inside the village, insurgents stationed themselves on rooftops, including those of homes that were holding wedding events.

From there they began firing rocket-propelled grenades at a convoy of four military vehicles, Ahmed Karzai said he and his brother were told. The troops retaliated on a massive scale, killing and injuring dozens of villagers, including several family members of the bride and groom.

The precise number of casualties has yet to be determined, but figures reported by witnesses and district leaders range from 38 to 90 dead. As of Wednesday, about 50 victims, most of them women, had checked into Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar with serious injuries, including burns and severed limbs. Some with more severe injuries were taken to Quetta, Pakistan, district elders said.

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It remains unclear from reports gathered from survivors whether troops launched an air strike or a mortar attack on the village. Women who were helping the bride plait her hair before the wedding told a Globe researcher they remembered hearing shooting, but they blacked out when bombs struck the mud-walled home.

When the women awoke, they said, they were with the bride in hospital. While none of the coalition forces fighting in Afghanistan has taken responsibility for the attack, the U.S. military and the Afghan Ministry of the Interior announced a joint investigation into the incident.

“Though the facts are unclear at this point, we take very seriously our responsibility to protect the people of Afghanistan and to avoid circumstances where non-combatant civilians are placed at risk, said Commander Jeff Bender, a spokesman for the U.S. military. “If innocent people were killed in this operation, we apologize and express our condolences to the families and the people of Afghanistan. We have dispatched coalition personnel to the site to quickly assess the situation and take actions as appropriate.”

Although Canadian troops are responsible for Kandahar province, the Canadian Forces is adamant about its lack of involvement in the attack, which came to light late Tuesday after victims began arriving at Mirwais Hospital.

Major Jay Janzen, a spokesman for the Canadian military, said troops occasionally patrol the district centre of Shah Wali Kowt, but they rarely venture the 20 kilometres north to the village that was attacked.

At an afternoon press conference Wednesday, Rahmatullah Raoufi, the governor of Kandahar, identified U.S. forces as the troops involved in the attack. He also said the troops called in an air strike on the village in response to enemy fire. His office is still working to confirm numbers of casualties. In the meantime, Ahmed Karzai and the President said they have dispatched a team of trusted elders from the Shah Wali Kowt district to conduct a separate investigation.

Ahmed Karzai said the attack is a sign of the Taliban's increasing reliance on terrorist tactics to turn locals against the government and coalition forces.

“People go against the government when civilian casualties happen,” Mr. Karzai said. “But the people know it's because of [the Taliban] these casualties are happening.”

The issue of civilian casualties has been an increasing point of friction between Afghan government officials and coalition forces.

Between 2006 and 2007, there was a three-fold increase in civilian deaths from aerial attacks, according to a report released in September by the New York-based group Human Rights Watch. The deaths are largely due to unplanned air strikes called in by U.S. forces, said the report, which put the number of civilian deaths due to air strikes at more than 300 for 2007.

This year, the use of air power has increased. During the past three months alone, more than 100 civilians have died in unplanned air strikes in southern Afghanistan, including at least 17 in Helmand province two weeks ago and 90 in Herat in August. A U.S. military investigation into that raid acknowledged the death of only 33 civilians.

Ahmed Karzai acknowledged that Afghan security forces have been hard-pressed to counter insurgents in the remote areas where militants control swaths of land and frequently exploit villagers to provoke attacks. He said that locals in rural Shah Wali Kowt rely mainly on police for protection, but their ranks are thin.

“The police have a problem there. They aren't really able to control the area,” he said. “The job of the police is to maintain law and order.

“They are not trained to fight guerrilla war. That's the job of the military,” he said.

Problems are compounded by the poor economic state of the region, which suffered further in Monday's attack when farm fields were destroyed.

“I feel sorry for them,” Ahmed Karzai said. “If the people could be armed, or if they were able to create a group to fight the Taliban, a lot of people would pick up arms.”

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