

In Afghan Attacks, Facts Are Murky. But It's Clear Deaths Are Piling Up.

With peace talks stalled, the details of intensifying strikes across the country, and their toll on civilians, are increasingly hard to pin down. But there's one certainty: Afghans are dying.

By Asadullah Timory and Mujib Mashal

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HERAT, Afghanistan — For a full day after airstrikes on a remote village in western Afghanistan on Wednesday, the only certainty was that people had perished.

The most basic facts — who had carried out the strikes, and how many Taliban and civilians were killed — were impossible to pin down amid the denials, conflicting statements and exaggerations.

With the start of peace talks between the Taliban and the government delayed by months, the Afghan war has spiraled into a deadlier phase, even as the United States continues to withdraw its forces. Car bombs, roadside bombs and airstrikes wreak carnage across the country, killing dozens of Afghans everyday.

But as the war has spread, the exact nature of the attacks and their toll, particularly on civilians, has increasingly grown opaque.

The Taliban often flatly deny incidents that kill civilians, even when the bodies are there to be buried. Protest and pressure turns the government's denials of civilian casualties in its operations into investigations that rarely result in follow-through or answers.

The U.S. military, after a deal with the Taliban in February that was supposed to produce something resembling a cease-fire between them, has quietly returned to striking Taliban units that it sees as preparing attacks on its Afghan allies, but it no longer officially acknowledges those strikes.

Making the battlefield still more murky has been the presence of other militant groups in addition to the Taliban, including factions with long ties to Al Qaeda as well as a branch of the Islamic State.

The airstrikes on Wednesday in the Guzara district of Herat Province struck a group of 100 to 150 people who had gathered to welcome a Taliban member who had been held by the government, according to survivors, local officials and community leaders. He was released as part of a prisoner swap that is supposed to open the way for direct negotiations between the insurgents and the government.

As part of the U.S. deal with the insurgents, the Afghan government was expected to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in return for 1,000 Afghan troops. But the government opposed the trade at first, and then only agreed to a phased release of captives after pressure from the Trump administration.

Afghan officials say about 4,000 Taliban prisoners have been released so far — and some of them, they claim, have returned to the battlefield.

The Taliban have released about 800 of the Afghan troops.

As the prisoner swap dragged on for months, the Taliban cranked up its attacks across the country. Feeling pressure, the Afghan government announced it was going on the offensive, although its troops have been forced to largely defend against Taliban assaults.

American aircraft, mostly drones and A-10 jets, have carried out at least 40 strikes on Taliban targets since the Feb. 29 agreement, a U.S. military official familiar with the operations said. But the Pentagon has not openly acknowledged most of its attacks, in an attempt to keep the already shaky peace process on track.



Taliban prisoners at the Bagram Military Base in Afghanistan, before being released in late May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

In recent days, a bloody wave of violence has intensified. A Taliban roadside bomb killed seven members of the security forces, including senior local officials, in southern Uruzgan Province.

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In northern Baghlan Province, the Afghan air force struck two houses, an attack based on intelligence that Taliban fighters were staying there. Officials later found out that the insurgents had left and the strikes had killed five civilians, according to the district governor.

In Kandahar Province, a Taliban infiltrator killed about a dozen police officers.

In Khogyani district in the east, the Afghan government said 31 Taliban were killed in one battle, which involved heavy air power.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy for Afghan peace, condemned the Guzara airstrikes, saying that civilians were among the casualties. He also condemned the spate of recent Taliban attacks.

“The last 24 hours have been very violent in Afghanistan with many losing their lives,” Mr. Khalilzad wrote on Twitter. “The Afghan people want an immediate start of peace negotiations and a settlement that is in their best interest. More graves will not bring negotiations forward.”

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

But exactly what happened in Guzara, and how many people were killed, remained uncertain. Increasingly, it appeared the casualties were a mix of Taliban and civilians, as is often the case.

Arbab Sarbeland, a local leader from the neighboring Adraskan district who was there for the ceremony, said helicopter gunships started hitting the area around 9 a.m. After the helicopters left, survivors loaded three dead and four wounded people into cars, but that turned out to be just the first of several attacks that day.

It is not clear how many times the helicopters circled back to strike again, or if other aircraft were also involved.

Noor Ahmad Khan, who was at the district center during the attack, said a relative he had dispatched to the village for information had told him the civilian toll stood at 12 dead and 22 wounded, but he would not comment on the number of Taliban casualties.

Late on Wednesday, Abdul Salam Azimi, the police chief of Guzara district, said “about 50 Taliban are killed or wounded.” The Taliban, in a statement that said nothing about casualties to its fighters, said 8 civilians were killed in the strikes and 12 wounded.

By the end of the day on Wednesday, it still wasn’t clear who had carried out the attack. American officials said it wasn’t the U.S. military.

A spokesman for Afghanistan’s Defense Ministry said it had “not carried out any airstrike in Herat,” and denied claims that one of the strikes had hit a vehicle carrying women and children. What damaged the vehicle, he said, was “actually a roadside bomb.”

But around midnight, the Afghan defense ministry changed its position, admitting it had been behind the airstrikes and promising to investigate claims of civilian casualties.

On Thursday, Asadullah Khalid, Afghanistan’s acting defense minister, said that he would show evidence that Afghan forces had struck Taliban fighters and that he was “hopeful there are no civilian casualties.”

The Defense Ministry on Thursday afternoon released a 30-second video clip as evidence it had struck the Taliban. The clip, which lacked any time or date stamp, showed about a dozen armed men around vehicles and motorcycles. There was nothing in the video to show that they were, in fact, the same men who were killed and wounded on Wednesday.

Assadullah Timory reported from Herat, and Mujib Mashal from Kabul. Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting from Washington and Fahim Abed from Kabul.