

NATO Airstrike Magnifies Political Divide Over the War in Afghanistan

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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, Shafullah, 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,” Shafullah, 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.”

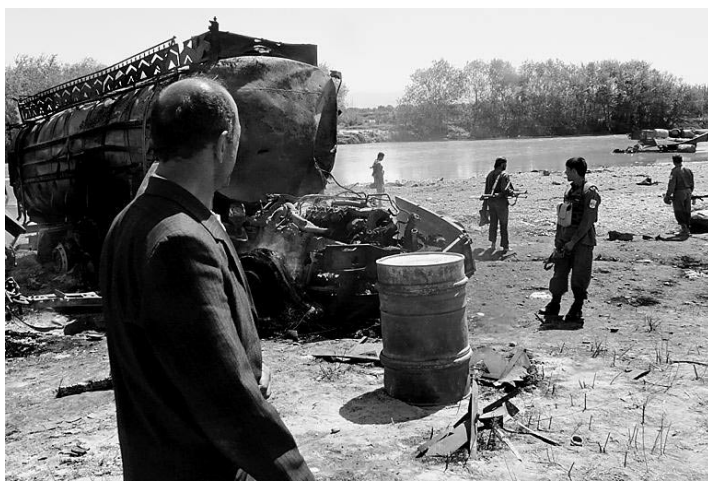
German forces in northern Afghanistan under the NATO command called in the attack, and German military officials initially insisted that no civilians had been killed. But a Defense Ministry spokesman in Berlin later said the ministry believed that more than 50 fighters had been

Reporting was contributed by Abdul Waheed Wafa from Kabul, Afghanistan; Sultan M. Munadi from Kunduz; Judy Dempsey from Berlin; and Sharon Otterman from New York.



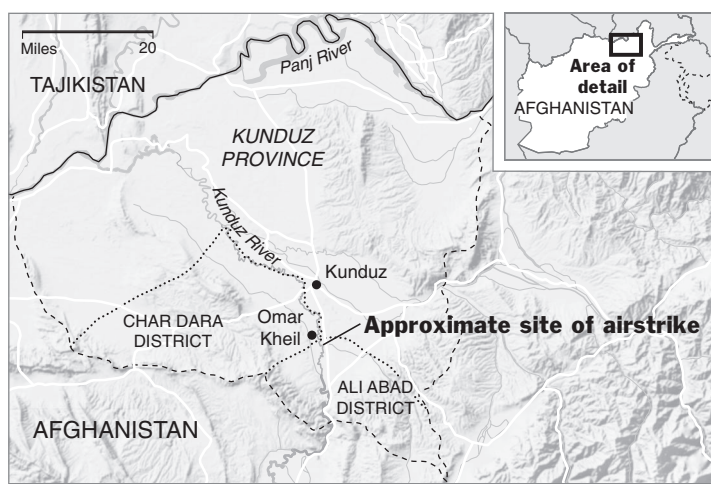
AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Afghan villagers on Friday buried one of the victims of a NATO airstrike near Kunduz that officials said killed up to 90 people.



WAHDAT/REUTERS

NATO officials said the attack hit two fuel tankers near Omar Kheil, at the border of the districts of Char Dara and Ali Abad.



THE NEW YORK TIMES

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 fire-fights 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.

Premier Reaffirms Britain’s Afghan Role, but Seeks More NATO Aid

By JOHN F. BURNS

LONDON — With support for Britain’s military role in Afghanistan weakening in opinion polls and among lawmakers in the ruling Labour Party, Prime Minister Gordon Brown recommitted his government on Friday to its partnership with the United States and other allied nations in the battle with the Taliban.

“When the security of our country is at stake we cannot walk away,” Mr. Brown said in a speech that aides billed as a watershed moment in the debate in Britain over the Afghan conflict and rising casualties being suffered by British troops. He added: “A safer Britain requires a safer Afghanistan.”

But the British leader accompanied his vow to stick with the British commitment with a fresh demand that other NATO nations accept a heavier share of the growing combat with the Taliban. He made no mention of the nations that British officials have identified in the past as laggards in their willingness to help with combat — principally France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

While Mr. Brown spoke bluntly. “While it is right that we play our part, so, too, must others take their fair share of this burden of responsibility,” he said. “Forty-two countries are involved, and all must ask themselves if they are doing enough. For terrorism knows no borders.”

But the appeal seemed unlikely to make much impact on European leaders, who are faced with similar resistance from their own

Judy Dempsey contributed reporting from Berlin.

electorates to any wider Afghan role. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, who is running for a second term in an election later this month, faces polls showing that more than 70 percent of Germans are opposed to the country’s existing 4,000-troop commitment. Polls show similar resistance in Italy, France and Spain.

Mr. Brown said the reluctance of some troop contributors to accept their share of the fighting has weakened the resolve of others in the 103,000-troop coalition and prompted them to consider withdrawing from the conflict. He mentioned Canada and the Netherlands, which have been involved in the bloody fighting in Helmand Province, and Japan.

The Brown speech was certain to have been closely watched in Washington, where President Obama faces a quandary similar to Mr. Brown’s, with liberals in the Democratic Party and others increasingly in opposition to the American commitment in Afghanistan. Britain, with 9,100 troops, is the second largest troop contributor to the coalition, behind 63,000 Americans, and any hint that Britain might reconsider its commitment could send other nations hastening to the exit.

For Mr. Brown, who returned Friday from a brief visit to British troops and talks in Kabul with American commanders, the speech had broader overtones. It comes at a time when domestic critics have assailed him for undermining relations with the United States with his government’s actions over the release of the only man convicted in the 1988 Lockerbie airliner bombing.

The 57-year-old prime minister



POOL PHOTO BY SHAUN CURRY

Prime Minister Gordon Brown of Britain, right, and Defense Minister Bob Ainsworth took questions in London on Friday.

An appeal unlikely to have much influence on Europe’s leaders.

made no mention of the freeing of Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, released two weeks ago by the Scottish government on compassionate parole from a life sentence for his role in the deaths of 270 people, including 189 Americans, who were killed in the bombing. Many in Britain have seen Mr. Megrahi’s release as the most damaging event in relations with the United States in decades.

But critics at home have accused Mr. Brown of duplicity for allowing officials of his government to assure the United States that Mr. Megrahi would serve out his term in Scotland while high-level British emissaries were telling the Libyan government he favored Mr. Megrahi’s going home to die from his terminal prostate

cancer. Mr. Brown used his appearance before the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London to address the issue indirectly.

“I am confident that the alliance between Britain and the United States is stronger than ever,” he said.

But on Afghanistan, the prime minister is at an awkward crossroads. Opinion polls have detected a rising unease about the war among Britons in the wake of a wave of British military casualties, including 50 soldiers killed in the past four months. The British losses have tracked a similar rise in American deaths.

Recent polls have shown about 60 percent of those questioned in Britain opposing Britain’s Afghan involvement — a sharp turnaround from polls taken in the conflict’s early years, when British casualties were low. With Labour trailing the opposition Conservatives by wide margins in voter preferences for a general election next spring, Mr. Brown

can ill afford to align himself with policies that alienate Labour’s popular base.

On the eve of Friday’s speech, he had what amounted to an early warning. Eric Joyce, a Labour lawmaker who was an aide to Bob Ainsworth, the defense minister, resigned abruptly over Afghanistan. Mr. Joyce, 49, who was previously an army officer, said in a letter to the prime minister that Britain should set a date for withdrawing its troops, since the public would not “accept for much longer that our losses can be justified by simply referring to the risk of greater terrorism on our streets.”

In his speech, Mr. Brown acknowledged that most people in Britain were anxious to know how long their troops would stay in Afghanistan, but he said it would depend on how quickly the Afghan Army could take over the fighting. He said he had used his meeting over the weekend with Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the United States and NATO commander, to press for a six-month speedup, to November 2010, in the deadline for increasing the Afghan Army to 134,000 troops from its present level of 80,000.

The prime minister hinted, too, that he had told General McChrystal that Britain was not likely to agree to send more troops of its own if American commanders asked. Mr. Brown said he was pleased that General McChrystal agreed with the British view that the way to meet the Taliban challenge was to train more Afghan troops, and to do it more swiftly, an effort Mr. Brown said Britain planned to make a larger part of its own Afghan effort.

Embassy Guards In Kabul Are Fired

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Eight civilian security guards at the United States Embassy in Afghanistan were fired and two resigned following accusations of lewd behavior and sexual misconduct at their living quarters.

The Kabul senior management team of ArmorGroup North America, the private contractor that provides guards for the State Department, was also “being replaced immediately,” the embassy said Friday in a statement.

The fired guards, who left Afghanistan on Friday, all appeared in photographs that depicted guards and supervisors in various stages of nudity at parties where alcohol flowed, the embassy said. Their names and nationalities were not released; nearly two-thirds of the 450 embassy guards are Gurkhas from Nepal and northern India.

The State Department spokesman, Ian C. Kelly, said in Washington that the government had made it clear to ArmorGroup that the guards in the photographs must go. He also said that the State Department had insisted that Armor Group replace its management team on the ground.

The scandal surfaced this week when an independent watchdog group, the Project on Government Oversight, said the embassy guards were subjected to abuse and hazing by supervisors.

Afghan Fraud Denied

By The New York Times

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Ahmed Wali Karzai, a brother of President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, rejected accusations on Friday that his aides had detained a tribal leader and closed polling stations to stuff ballot boxes in his brother’s favor during recent presidential elections.

The allegations were made by the district chief of Shorabak, Delaga Bariz, and other elders from his tribe in an interview.

Ahmad Wali Karzai is the head of the provincial council of Kandahar and was running to retain the post in the elections held Aug. 20.

In Kandahar, he said his accusers had accepted money from the presidential challenger Abdullah Abdullah to campaign for him, and had concocted a story when they failed to bring in the votes that they promised.

Gates Assails News Agency for Publishing Photo of Marine Killed in Afghanistan

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

A furious Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has upbraided The Associated Press for its decision to go against the wishes of a young Marine’s family and publish a photograph of him after he was killed in Afghanistan.

In a scathing letter to Tom Cur-

ONLINE: DIFFICULT CHOICES

For a full discussion of the issues surrounding publication of the photographs, see the Lens blog:

<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com>

ley, president and chief executive of The A.P., Mr. Gates said that the news agency’s decision was “appalling” and that the issue was one not of constitutionality but of “judgment and common decency.”

The A.P. defended the decision, which editors said they made only after careful review and sharing the pictures with the family. In an explanation of its deliberations, The A.P. said it decided “to make public an image that conveys the grimness of war and the sacrifice of young men and women fighting it.”

The publication of such dramatic images has been relatively

rare, partly because journalists are not often on hand to see such events and because military guidelines, which The A.P. followed, bar the showing of pictures of dead soldiers before the family is notified.

The photograph in question was part of a package of articles and photographs about Lance Cpl. Joshua M. Bernard, 21, of New Portland, Me., and his unit, which was ambushed in Afghanistan on Aug. 14. Before sending the package to its newspaper clients, The A.P. sent a reporter to Maine to talk with the man’s family. They did so out of respect, Michael Oreskes, The A.P.’s senior

managing editor, said in an interview, not to ask permission to publish the pictures. But the father, John Bernard, a former Marine, asked The A.P. not to publish the picture, saying it would only hurt the family more.

In an advisory to clients, The A.P. said its articles and photographs “offered vivid insights into how the battle was fought, and into Bernard’s character and background.” After the articles and pictures had been distributed but before they were published, Mr. Gates called Mr. Curley to urge him to change his mind.

“I am begging you to defer to the wishes of the family,” Mr.

Gates said, according to his spokesman. Shortly after hanging up, Mr. Gates sent his letter.

“The American people understand that death is an awful and inescapable part of war,” Mr. Gates wrote. But publishing this photo, he said, goes against the wishes of the family and thus would mark an “unconscionable departure from the restraint that most journalists and publications have shown covering the military since Sept. 11.”

A few newspapers have published the picture, and many more have not. The New York Times published the photograph on its Web site.