

## **Helmand: Caught Between the Tiger and the Precipice**

**Author:** IWPR

Residents find that, for them, there is little to choose between the government and the Taleban. Najib, 25, was still in shock as he spoke to a reporter about his ordeal in his native Hyderabad, a village in Greshk district of Helmand Province.

“The Taleban forced their way into our house,” he said, shaking. “They were trying to hide. And we tried to escape. They took away my brother, who used to work for the government. They said they would kill him. But when we tried to leave the house, to save ourselves from the Taleban, NATO was shooting at us, and killing us. They do not know who is Taleban and who is civilian.”

The June 30 bombing in Hyderabad left over 100 people dead, according to most sources. What is less clear is whether many of the victims were, in fact, combatants, or, like Najib and his family, bystanders in a war that is becoming increasingly vicious.

By now the differences are becoming academic: which town has the biggest death toll, where the Taleban are strongest, which bombing was most egregious. The details are always the same: a Taleban attack, a NATO response, dozens of bodies, piles of rubble, universal recriminations.

Complicating the situation is the absence of hard information. Most towns bombed are too remote to allow reporters easy access, and those reporting the casualty figures often have their own agenda.

For residents, the destruction of their homes and the death of their loved ones give rise to a wail of grief that tends to muddle some of the hard facts.

The Taleban are inclined to inflate civilian deaths and minimise losses among their fighters. The opposite tendency can be seen in NATO and Afghan government statistics.

Even within the Afghan government disagreements arise.

Dur Ali Shah, mayor of Greshk District, told reporters that 45 civilians were killed and 23 injured in the Hyderabad bombing. He added that 62 opposition fighters were also killed, although the number of wounded was unclear.

But Colonel Iqbal Gul, Greshk’s chief of police, denied the figures. “We sent a delegation to Hyderabad to search,” he told IWPR. “The results were eight civilians dead and four injured.” He added that 32 Taleban were killed, including two commanders.

NATO sources gave similar figures, as did Helmand’s new police chief, Mohammad Hussein Andiwali.

But Taleban spokesman Qari Yusuf denied that the attacks killed any Taleban.

“Two British military vehicles were burned,” he said. “All the soldiers inside were killed.”

Afghan president Hamed Karzai has become increasingly vehement in his condemnation of the bombing of non-combatants, and his government is launching an investigation into the mounting civilian casualties.

But for those caught up in the horror, this is of little comfort.

“The planes were bombing blindly,” said Sher Jan, a local resident. “At first the Taleban fired two missiles at a British convoy, then the airplanes came.”

Villagers began to evacuate, said Sher Jan, loading whatever they could of their household goods into various vehicles, including tractors. They formed a convoy and headed out of town, away from the fighting.

“There were more than 150 people in this convoy of tractors,” said Sher Jan. “The planes came again and bombed the whole line. To the north of Hyderabad there were others trying to escape, and they were bombed as well. It was a massacre.”

One resident, who did not want to give his name, called down a plague on both sides.

“When the government and NATO are in the villages, they arrest everyone if even so much as one bullet is fired at them. They do not care who is Taleban and who is civilian. But then if the Taleban win they will arrest everyone who worked with the government.”

He sighed, and voicing an old Pashto proverb, said, “We are between the tiger and the precipice.”

Aziz Ahmad Tassal is an IWPR staff reporter in Helmand.

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