

## Nato air strike in Afghanistan kills scores

At least 90 believed dead including 40 civilians after jets blow up fuel tankers hijacked by Taliban

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At least 90 people including 40 civilians have been killed in northern [Afghanistan](#) after [Nato](#) launched an air strike on two fuel tankers hijacked by the [Taliban](#), Afghan officials said.

Militants seized the two trucks, which were delivering jet fuel to Nato forces, around midnight Afghan time. Nato launched the strike in Kunduz province as the Taliban fighters tried to drive the vehicles across a river, according to the local police chief, Gulam Mohyuddin.

The Nato secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, announced an investigation, saying: "A number of Taliban were killed and there is also a possibility of civilian casualties."

The provincial governor, Mohammad Omar, told Reuters the dead included villagers who had gathered to collect fuel from the tankers.



Lieutenant Commander Christine Sidenstricker, a press officer for the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), said Nato aircraft spotted the hijacked lorries on a river bank. "After observing that only insurgents were in the area, the local Isaf commander ordered air strikes which destroyed the fuel trucks and killed a large number of insurgents.

"The strike was against insurgents. That's who we believe was killed. But we are

absolutely investigating [reports of civilian deaths]."

Asked how pilots could know whether a crowd gathered around the truck included civilians or fighters, she said: "Based on information available at the scene, the commanders believed they were insurgents."

A Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said fighters had captured the two fuel tankers but one became stuck in mud by a village.

The Taliban decided to empty the tankers and local people arrived to take some of the fuel when jets blew the trucks up in a huge explosion.

One of the tanker drivers told the BBC two of his colleagues were beheaded during the Taliban hijacking.

The deaths could reignite anger with foreign troops over civilian casualties. Two months ago the new commander of US and Afghan forces in the country, General Stanley McChrystal, announced measures to reduce civilian casualties, which he said were undermining the war effort.

Rasmussen said the alliance remained committed to reducing civilian deaths caused by Nato forces, adding that the number had dropped by 95% this year.

Mohammad Humayun Khamosh, a doctor at Kunduz Central hospital in the provincial capital, said 13 people with burns were brought there for treatment but none of the dead had been taken to the hospital's morgue because the bodies were too badly burnt.

"It is very hard to collect dead bodies or remains from the blast because the fuel they were collecting was highly flammable," he said.

Ghulam Yahya, one of dozens of relatives gathered outside the hospital, said: "My brother was burnt when the aircraft bombed the fuel tankers. I don't know whether he is dead or alive."

Omar, the provincial governor, told the Associated Press that the dead included the senior Taliban commander for the district, Abdur Rahman, and four Chechen fighters.

"Abdur Rahman is a very dangerous man," he said.

The air strike was 1.2 miles from the village of Omar Khel, officials said.

The Kunduz area is patrolled mainly by Nato's German contingent, which is barred by Berlin from operating in combat zones.

McChrystal's tactical directive follows [intense criticism of Nato air strikes](#) by the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, and others this summer. The controversy was fuelled by [a report from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan](#) that said coalition air strikes were responsible for nearly a third of the 1,013 civilian deaths during the first half of the year.

The report found that Taliban landmines and suicide bombers were responsible for 59% of civilian casualties during those six months.

In July, it emerged that the Ministry of Defence [had paid or was considering compensation for more than 100 civilian deaths](#) caused by the British army in Helmand province.