

Sole Informant Guided Decision On Afghan Strike
By Rajiv Chandrasekaran
Washington Post Foreign Service
Sunday, September 6, 2009

HAJI SAKHI DEDBY, Afghanistan, Sept. 5 -- To the German commander, it seemed to be a fortuitous target: More than 100 Taliban insurgents were gathering around two hijacked fuel tankers that had become stuck in the mud near this small farming village.

The grainy live video transmitted from an American F-15E fighter jet circling overhead, which was projected on a screen in a German tactical operations center four miles north of here, showed numerous black dots around the trucks -- each of them a thermal image of a human but without enough detail to confirm whether they were carrying weapons. An Afghan informant was on the phone with an intelligence officer at the center, however, insisting that everybody at the site was an insurgent, according to an account that German officers here provided to NATO officials.

Based largely on that informant's assessment, the commander ordered a 500-pound, satellite-guided bomb to be dropped on each truck early Friday. The vehicles exploded in a fireball that lit up the night sky for miles, incinerating many of those standing nearby.

A NATO fact-finding team estimated Saturday that about 125 people were killed in the bombing, at least two dozen of whom -- but perhaps many more -- were not insurgents. To the team, which is trying to sort out this complicated incident, mindful that the fallout could further sap public support in Afghanistan for NATO's security mission here, the target appeared to be far less clear-cut than it had to the Germans.

One survivor, convalescing from abdominal wounds at a hospital

in the nearby city of Kunduz, said he went to the site because he thought he could get free fuel. Another patient, a 10-year-old boy with shrapnel in his left leg, said he went to gawk, against his father's advice. In Kabul, the Afghan capital, relatives of two severely burned survivors being treated at an intensive-care unit said Taliban fighters forced dozens of villagers to assist in moving the bogged-down tankers.

"They came to everyone's house asking for help," said Mirajuddin, a shopkeeper who lost six of his cousins in the bombing -- none of whom, he said, was an insurgent. "They started beating people and pointing guns. They said, 'Bring your tractors and help us.' What could we do?"

None of the survivors and the relatives dispute that some Taliban fighters were at the scene. But just how many remains unclear, as does the number of civilians. And because many of the bodies were burned beyond recognition, and others were buried in the hours after the explosion, it may be impossible to ascertain.

The decision to bomb the tankers based largely on a single human intelligence source appears to violate the spirit of a tactical directive aimed at reducing civilian casualties that was recently issued by U.S. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the new commander of the NATO mission in Afghanistan. The directive states that NATO forces cannot bomb residential buildings based on a sole source of information and that troops must establish a "pattern of life" to ensure that no civilians are in the target area. Although the directive does not apply to airstrikes in the open, NATO officials said it is McChrystal's intent for those standards to apply to all uses of air power, except when troops are in imminent danger.

McChrystal's advisers allowed a Washington Post reporter to travel with a NATO fact-finding team and attend its otherwise closed-door meetings with German troops and Afghan officials. Portions of this account are based on those discussions.

The incident has generated intense disquiet among Afghans, many of whom say military operations since the fall of the Taliban government in late 2001 have resulted in an unacceptably high number of civilian casualties. Local media reports have been filled with people alleging -- some with little proof -- that scores of civilians were killed in the airstrike.

Aware that another mass civilian casualty incident could further diminish public support for the multinational mission to combat the Taliban, McChrystal sought to handle this case differently from his predecessors. The morning after the bombing, as Afghan television and radio stations began airing reports about it, he dispatched the team of senior officers to the area.

His headquarters had only a six-line situation report from the Germans. The team's assignment was to figure out what had occurred and to help him communicate a forthright message to the Afghan public with the hope that owning up to a potential mistake quickly could help defuse tensions.

Alarming Briefings

When the seven team members arrived in the northern city of Kunduz on Friday afternoon, their first order of business was to head to the bombing site. It was just four miles south of the airport where they landed.

But the German commander, Col. Georg Klein, urged them not to go. Residents were angry, he said, and German forces had been attacked a few hours earlier. "There's a likelihood we'll be shot at," he said.

Klein also deemed a visit to the hospital to be too dangerous. Instead, the officers traveled to the nearby headquarters of the Kunduz province reconstruction team, home to about 1,000 German troops responsible for security and rebuilding operations

in the area. There the team members settled into a small octagonal room for a series of briefings from Klein and his subordinates.

Without a chance to talk to survivors, they would not be able to determine that day whether the German claims that no civilians were killed were accurate. The consequence was that NATO would have to continue issuing tentative statements promising a thorough investigation, while plenty of Afghans were taking to the airwaves to describe what they had seen.

But the briefings proved to be more valuable -- and alarming -- than the team had expected.

Klein told the team, led by British Air Commodore Paddy Teakle, the NATO mission's director of air operations, that he had asked a U.S. B-1B bomber flying over northern Afghanistan to search for two fuel trucks that had been hijacked Thursday evening. The bomber located the trucks, which by then were stuck on a small island in the middle of the Kunduz River, shortly after midnight Friday. The B-1 crew reported seeing rocket-propelled grenades and small arms among some of the people at the site, Klein said.

After 10 minutes over the site, the bomber left to refuel. Klein summoned a new warplane, declaring the incident an imminent threat.

"My feeling was that if we let them get away with these tankers, they will prepare them to attack police stations or even the PRT," or provincial reconstruction team, he said.

Twenty minutes later, two F-15E Strike Eagles arrived. A video camera pod beamed live images to Klein's command center. He and his troops could see the trucks -- and scores of people around them.

His intelligence chief had spoken to an Afghan source who insisted that everyone at the site was an insurgent. The description of the scene the source provided was similar to what Klein was seeing beamed from the F-15.

"The whole story matched 100 percent," Klein said.

But there was no way to tell whether the dots on the screen were insurgents, as the source maintained.

"We heard there was a tanker and everyone was going to collect free fuel, so I went with them," said Mohammed Shafiullah, the 10-year-old with the leg wound. He rode a donkey from his village and took in the scene from the western riverbank.

He probably would not have been alive had the airstrike coordinator at Klein's command center not rejected the F-15 pilot's recommendation to use 2,000-pound bombs on the trucks, which would have created far wider devastation. Instead, the coordinator demanded that 500-pound GBU-38 bombs be used.

Klein ordered the strike about 2:30 a.m. Two minutes later, the bombs had hit their targets.

Inside the command center, the screen showed a huge mushroom cloud enveloping the island. A few black dots -- survivors -- could be seen scurrying away. But most of the 100 or so dots that had been on the screen were gone.

To those on the riverbank, the island, which is about 30 yards wide and 150 yards long, appeared to be consumed by fire. Nearby residents ran to the scene to look for relatives and extricate survivors.

"Everyone was panicked," said Mirajuddin, the man who lost six cousins. "It was a horrible night."

Instead of sending troops to the scene for an assessment of casualties -- as McChrystal's directive requires -- the Germans waited until morning to send an unmanned aircraft over the site to take photographs. The first German troops did not arrive at the scene until noon Friday. By then, all the bodies had been removed.

Mirajuddin said he and his relatives found the bodies of only three of his cousins. He buried them that morning in the same grave, he said.

On Friday night, though, his story, and those of others in the area, were unknown to the fact-finding team. The Germans were still insisting that only insurgents were targeted. Even so, members of the team came to believe that there almost certainly had been civilian casualties.

In Kabul, McChrystal issued a taped message: "I take this possible loss of life or injury to innocent Afghans very seriously."

Unexpected Support

At midday Saturday, after visiting the hospital and flying over the bombing site in a helicopter, the team met with two local officials. The NATO officers were expecting anger and calls for compensation. What they received was a totally unanticipated sort of criticism.

"I don't agree with the rumor that there were a lot of civilian casualties," said one key local official, who said he did not want to be named because he fears Taliban retribution. "Who goes out at 2 in the morning for fuel? These were bad people, and this was a good operation."

A few hours later, McChrystal arrived at the reconstruction team's base in Kunduz. A group of leaders from the area, including the

chairman of the provincial council and the police chief, were there to meet him. So, too, were members of an investigative team dispatched by President Hamid Karzai.

McChrystal began expressing sympathy "for anyone who has been hurt or killed."

The council chairman, Ahmadullah Wardak, cut him off. He wanted to talk about the deteriorating security situation in Kunduz, where Taliban activity has increased significantly in recent months. NATO forces in the area, he told the fact-finding team before McChrystal arrived, need to be acting "more strongly" in the area.

His concern is shared by some officials at the NATO mission headquarters, who contend that German troops in Kunduz have not been confronting the rise in Taliban activity with enough ground patrols and comprehensive counterinsurgency tactics.

"If we do three more operations like was done the other night, stability will come to Kunduz," Wardak told McChrystal. "If people do not want to live in peace and harmony, that's not our fault."

McChrystal seemed to be caught off guard.

"We've been too nice to the thugs," Wardak continued.

As McChrystal drove to the bombing site -- defying German suggestions that the area was too dangerous -- one senior NATO official noted that the lack of opposition from local officials, despite relatively clear evidence that some civilians were killed, could help to de-escalate tensions.

"We got real lucky here," the official said.

But McChrystal still had a message to deliver. Even if the Afghan

officials were not angry, he certainly did not seem pleased.

After fording the muddy river to see the bombing site -- getting his pants wet up to his knees -- he addressed a small group of journalists at the reconstruction team headquarters and said it was "clear there were some civilians harmed at that site." He said NATO would fully investigate the incident.

"It's a serious event that's going to be a test of whether we are willing to be transparent and whether we are willing to show that we are going to protect the Afghan people," he said.