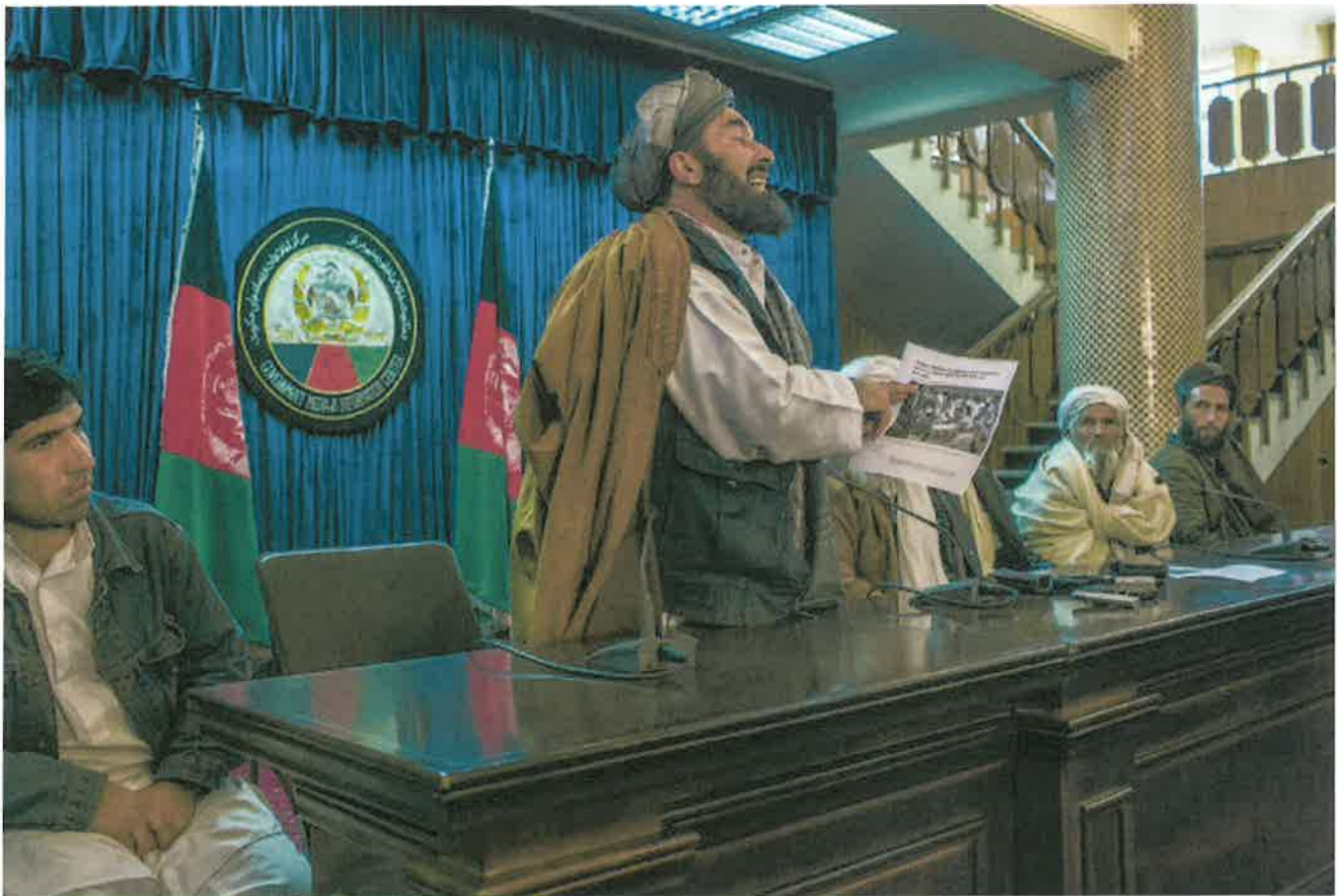


# Afghan Villagers Brought to Back Airstrike Report

By [MATTHEW ROSENBERG](#)JAN. 26, 2014

Inside



A resident of Wazghar, which was hit by an airstrike this month, spoke at a news conference called Sunday by officials in Kabul. Mauricio Lima for The New York Times

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Afghan government brought the seven men to a news conference Sunday morning to bolster its claims that American forces were responsible for the deaths of civilians in a remote

village last week. In addition to a dossier of grisly photographs and video clips released earlier, reporters would now hear firsthand accounts from residents of the village.

It was all going according to plan until one journalist handed the men a copy of a photograph from the government's dossier. Alif Shah Ahmadzai, one of the villagers, declared that the photo showed people at a funeral held in his village on Jan. 16 for civilians killed by American airstrikes the day before. "I know all of them," he said.

The trouble was that, as many of the reporters at the news conference already knew, the photograph had been taken four years earlier, in a village hundreds of miles away.

The briefing with the villagers was hastily arranged by the Afghan government specifically to rebut [a report in The New York Times](#) on Sunday that much of the evidence in the dossier, assembled by President Hamid Karzai's aides, had been misrepresented or could not be verified, including the four-year-old photo.

Now, the seven villagers were pointing to the photograph, which was actually taken at a funeral for victims of a NATO airstrike in northern Afghanistan in 2009 and was distributed then by Agence France-Presse and Getty Images.

Mr. Ahmadzai rattled off the names of neighbors he claimed to see in the photo. "The man bending in the picture with a white hat is Ishaq, son of Hajji Aman," he said. "The other man you see is Alif Jan, son of Hussain Khan. This other man is Mohammad Jan, and the other person is Mohammad Akbar."

He said that 13 people from his village, Wazghar, were buried at the funeral, and indignantly brushed aside skeptical questions from the reporters.

"If there were not 13 fresh dead bodies in the village, I would say you should hang me," he said. "The New York Times spreads lies to put salt in our wounds."

There is no dispute that [American airstrikes on Jan. 15 did hit Wazghar](#), a few hours' drive west of Kabul in a valley controlled by the Taliban, and that some civilians were killed there. The American-led coalition put the number at two, and said the airstrikes were called in after a force of Afghan commandos and their American advisers were pinned down by heavy Taliban fire from the village and were unable to retreat.

By contrast, a commission appointed by Mr. Karzai to investigate the episode said that Americans had bombarded Wazghar for eight hours, and had then swept through the village shooting men, women and children in the streets and in their houses. The commission said it could prove that at least 12 civilians were killed, along with four Taliban fighters.

The seven village men at the news conference stuck to that same outline of events. But in their telling, the bombardment grew fiercer, and the Taliban vanished.

"American troops bombed the village very brutally with three types of aircraft," Mr. Ahmadzai said. There were bombers that "were flying high above, and later on fighter jets and in the final stage, helicopters firing rockets."

He insisted that only civilians were killed, and rejected American assertions that Taliban fighters had opened fire from inside houses. "A Talib would never fire from a house where his family lives," Mr. Ahmadzai said. "There are no Taliban in our village."

Members of the presidential commission, though, said that they did not visit the village to investigate in person, specifically because of the threat posed by insurgents. Instead, the commission's chairman, Abdul Satar

Khawasi, a lawmaker from the area with well-documented anti-American views, sent his driver and bodyguard to interview villagers and take photos and video.

Aimal Faizi, a spokesman for Mr. Karzai, told Agence France-Presse on Sunday that the government was “taking this issue very seriously, to find out who put this photograph in the dossier.” He insisted that even if the 2009 photograph and another years-old image were set aside, “there is no lack of evidence about the operation from at least 10 other photos and matching video in the dossier, as well as from the families and survivors.”

For many American and Afghan officials, though, the inclusion of misrepresented photos in the dossier reinforced their doubts about the inquiry. “He sent his driver?” said one incredulous American official. “What is this, ‘Godfather II?’ How can they call that an investigation?”

American officials are accustomed to seeing the Taliban try to paint the coalition forces as brutal occupiers. But to have Afghan officials do the same is the more frustrating for the fact that the Afghan government is largely financed by the United States and its Western allies, who helped create it and have propped it up with regular cash infusions.

As it happened, Mr. Ahmadzai turned up for the news conference at the government media center carrying about 100,000 afghanis in cash — about \$2,000, a princely sum in Afghanistan. The cash was discovered by security guards who searched Mr. Ahmadzai when he arrived.

He explained that he had come straight from the Presidential Palace, and had been given the money by Mr. Karzai’s advisers.

The president’s office frequently gives money to the relatives of Afghan civilians killed in the conflict. Mr. Ahmadzai said that was the case with his money, and that he had not been paid to back the commission’s version of events in Wazghar.

“Do you think we lie for 100,000 afghanis?” Mr. Ahmadzai said. “God may strike us down if we lie for money.”

Azam Ahmed and Haris Kakar contributed reporting.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/world/asia/government-dossier-accusing-us-in-carnage-amplifies-doubts-about-karzai.html?ref=world>

## **False Claims in Afghan Accusations on U.S. Raid Add to Doubts on Karzai**

By [MATTHEW ROSENBERG](#)JAN. 25, 2014

Inside



An image of a funeral in Afghanistan that the government tied to a recent American airstrike actually took place in 2009. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

KABUL, Afghanistan — It was the kind of dossier that the Taliban often publish, purporting to show the carnage inflicted during a raid by American forces: photographs of shattered houses and bloodied, broken bodies, and video images of anguish at a village funeral, all with gut-churning impact and no proof of authenticity.

But this time, it was the government of President Hamid Karzai that was handing out the inflammatory dossier, the product of a commission's investigation into [airstrikes on Jan. 15](#) on a remote village and the supposed American cover-up that followed.

In an apparent effort to demonize their American backers, a coterie of Afghan officials appears to have crossed a line that deeply troubles Western officials here: They falsely represented at least some of the evidence in the dossier, and distributed other material whose provenance, at best, could not be determined.

An examination of the dossier by The New York Times also revealed that much of the same material was posted on a Taliban website last week, a rare instance of the militant group's political speech matching that of the government it is fighting to topple.



Launch media viewer

A young man reportedly killed in the airstrike. The authenticity of the images is under question. Afghanistan Presidential Palace, via Associated Press

Mr. Karzai's [growing antipathy toward the United States](#) is no secret, and civilian casualties have proved to be [one of the most corrosive issues](#) between the allies. Yet the photographs and the video, handed out by Mr. Karzai's office last week, have injected a new level of vitriol into the relationship and shown how the Karzai government's political speech has been increasingly mirroring that of the Taliban — including the insurgents' habit of twisting facts, or simply making them up when necessary.

The purpose of the dossier, according to other Afghan officials, was to justify Mr. Karzai's [stalling on signing a long-term security agreement](#) with the United States and to improve the chances for peace talks with the Taliban by showing that he is no American stooge, as the insurgents have often derided him.

For American and European officials, the episode has reinforced a growing sense that for all the talk of securing an enduring partnership, Mr. Karzai may have no intention of ever signing the security agreement. Without an agreement, the Obama administration has said, it will [pull American forces from Afghanistan](#) when the NATO combat mission here ends this year.

“There is no overall partnership,” a European diplomat said. “We have some Afghan partners, and we have a lot of Afghans in the government who want us to leave. I think we're all beginning to realize that.”

The troubled relationship with Mr. Karzai has worsened to a point where the Afghan leader, in his public statements, seems to blame the United States for the war with the Taliban. He often portrays American intransigence as the main obstacle to peace, not the Taliban's unwillingness. The sentiment underpinned a statement Mr. Karzai made on Jan. 18 after the insurgents [attacked a restaurant in Kabul popular with Western civilians](#), killing 21 people. He drew equivalence between the restaurant attack and the latest airstrikes, using the opportunity as a chance to castigate the United States along with the Taliban.

Speaking to reporters on Saturday, Mr. Karzai implied that Americans wanted the security deal to keep the war here going. He could not agree to any deal, he said, if Americans “expect Afghanistan to continue as a semi-war zone for many years to come.”

He cited the dossier to drive home his point. “Did you see the video?” he said. “Did you see the woman whose face was missing? She was a member of this nation.”

Mr. Karzai’s remarks seemed in line with what Afghan officials close to the president say is his current habit of seeking out negative information about the Americans, and often disregarding more neutral or positive reports. One official said he has told advisers that the United States is ultimately responsible for all Afghan deaths, even though the vast majority of civilian casualties come in Taliban attacks, according to the United Nations.

Western officials and some Afghan have begun to push back. On Jan. 17, after the lead Afghan investigator looking into the airstrikes said at least 14 civilians had been killed, Abdul Basir Salangi, the governor of Parwan Province, where the strikes took place, offered a blunt retort. He said the death toll was in the single digits and those claiming higher deaths tolls were “supporters of the Taliban.”

No one disputes that civilians died in the airstrikes, which hit Wazghar, a remote village in a valley thick with Taliban fighters. But more than a week after the raid, the death tolls offered by the American-led coalition and the Afghan government differ starkly, as do their accounts of how the civilians died.

The operation was planned and led by the Afghan Army, American officials have repeatedly emphasized. They said the airstrikes were necessary to save dozens of Afghan commandos and a handful of American advisers who were pinned down by heavy Taliban fire; an American and an Afghan had already been killed in the action.

The airstrikes destroyed the two compounds producing the heaviest Taliban fire, and two children were killed in one of the houses, they said.

By contrast, the Afghan commission appointed by Mr. Karzai to investigate the raid described the action as primarily American, with roughly eight hours of indiscriminate and unprovoked bombing followed by a house-to-house rampage by American soldiers. The commission has said that it can prove that 12 civilians were killed, and that there were indications of two to five additional civilian deaths.

“Villagers on the streets and even inside their houses were shot,” said Abdul Satar Khawasi, a member of Parliament from the area who led the investigation. “Ten houses were destroyed.”

He said the bulk of the evidence came from two sources: accounts given by villagers, and the photographs and video that were distributed last Sunday by Mr. Karzai’s office.

No commission members appear to have actually visited Wazghar. Instead, Mr. Khawasi sent his driver and a bodyguard to conduct the interviews and take photographs and video, according to Mr. Salangi, the provincial governor.

But at least two of the images distributed in the dossier could not have shown casualties from the Wazghar strikes, because the photos are more than three years old.

One was taken at the funeral of victims of a NATO airstrike in northern Afghanistan in 2009, which killed at least 70 civilians. It was distributed by Agence France-Presse and Getty Images and published in The Times on Sept. 5, 2009, along with an article about the airstrike.

The origins of the second misrepresented photograph are murkier. It shows the bodies of two boys wrapped in burial shrouds, and has been used for years on websites assailing civilian deaths in American drone strikes in Pakistan.

Now both the Afghan government and the Taliban are using it: It was posted on the Taliban's website two days before the government began handing out a CD-ROM with images said to be from Wazghar.

Aimal Faizi, a spokesman for Mr. Karzai, said the commission assembled the dossier and a reporter's query was "the first time I am hearing" that some of the material was misrepresented.

American officials would say only that they thought the doubts about the dossier spoke for themselves.

The CD-ROM contains nine other photographs, all of which appear to be frames from a video clip on the disk. The video purports to show the funeral of villagers who were killed in the airstrikes and houses that were destroyed. The graphic images include some of a woman whose face is gone.

The Times' examination found no physical clues in the video that would help determine where or when it was shot. The file's creation date is Dec. 18, nearly a month before the raid, though it may not be accurate; digital time stamps on the accompanying photos say they were created in April 2014, and the video's embedded data could be similarly unreliable.

Even if the video is actually of a funeral in Wazghar, some Afghan and Western officials said there was no way to tell from it whether an airstrike or some other gunfire or explosion had killed the people seen being buried, or who was responsible.

"There wasn't an investigation," said one commission member, who requested anonymity to avoid being seen to publicly challenge Mr. Karzai.

The commissioner said some officials complained to Mr. Karzai about the inquiry's conduct and conclusions, but he dismissed their objections in favor of Mr. Khawasi's account. "The president himself knows who is biased," the commissioner said.

He was referring to Mr. Khawasi's well-documented anti-American sentiments. In a video recorded two years ago, for instance, Mr. Khawasi is heard urging a crowd of angry Afghans to wage a holy war against Americans, saying, "Anyone who sits silent is a traitor."

Briefing reporters last week about his investigation, Mr. Khawasi called the airstrikes "cowardly bombardment." Americans, he said, "are heartless people."

The Taliban have since posted the purported funeral video on their website. The civilians were "killed mercilessly," the narrator says, and the images of the bodies show "actions that have documented American savagery."

Afghan employees of The New York Times contributed reporting.