

US STRIKE KILLS FIVE AFGHAN SOLDIERS IN CHARKH DISTRICT

In what is virtually certain to be a new example of why he continues not to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement, Afghan President Hamid Karzai is expected to react with anger toward the US strike this morning that killed five Afghan soldiers in an outpost in the Charkh District of Logar Province. Already, it is being pointed out that the US had to know about the location of the outpost. From the Washington Post:

“The coalition knows the location of every Afghan outpost,” said Abdul Wali, the head of the Logar Provincial Council. “How can such incidents happen?”

But BBC points out that it is even worse than that:

District governor Khalilullah Kamal, who has visited the scene, said the strike was carried out by a US drone.

“The post is totally destroyed,” he told the AFP news agency. “The Americans used to be in that post, but since they left the ANA [Afghan National Army] took over.”

Recall that in the incident where the US killed 24 Pakistani soldiers at a border checkpoint in 2011, at least parts of the facility that was attacked appeared to be makeshift structures that easily could have been mistaken for insurgent encampments. That clearly is not the case in the current situation, since the facility was built by and previously manned by the US. It seems to me that there is a good chance that the mistake in this case may have

been that the US believed the post to have been taken over by the Taliban when it in fact was still manned by the ANA. Given the multiple reports that drones are often spotted in the area, we are left to wonder if the drones spotted a pattern of activity that prompted the airstrike. Otherwise, since the Afghans claim they did not call in a strike, we are left to wonder just why the strike was carried out and what the mission was believed to be.

Details are still coming out on the incident, with some stories claiming the attack came from a drone and others saying it was an airstrike by manned aircraft. The New York Times contributes this on the question:

A spokesman for the American military said that the incident did not involve a drone, but rather manned aircraft. He did not provide further details.

Even though he says in his statement that the strike was carried out by a drone, the information quoted above from the district governor about the post being “totally destroyed” sounds to me more like the damage that would come from multiple manned aircraft equipped with multiple rockets and bombs, especially if the post consisted of multiple buildings.

I have seen no statements on the incident attributed to Karzai yet. ISAF already issued this embarrassed acknowledgement:

We can confirm that at least five Afghan National Army personnel were accidentally killed this morning during an operation in eastern Afghanistan.

An investigation is being conducted at this time to determine the circumstances that led to this unfortunate incident.

Our condolences go out to the families of the ANA soldiers who lost their lives and were wounded.

We value the strong relationship with our Afghan partners, and we will determine what actions will be taken to ensure incidents like this do not happen again.

Karzai spokesman Aimal Faizi is quoted by Reuters:

"We condemn the attack on the Afghan National Army in Logar," said Aimal Faizi, a spokesman for Karzai. "The president has ordered an investigation."

But in that Reuters article, Kamal, the district governor, seems to contradict some of the information he gave to BBC:

"Right now a discussion in the province is going on between Afghan officials and foreign forces to find out the reason for this attack," he said, describing the attack as having targeted a new outpost of the Afghan army.

Is Kamal claiming the outpost is new to the ANA since they just took it over from ISAF, or is he saying it is a new one they established and not one previously manned by the US, as he said to BBC? If it is the latter, then it will be necessary to review whether and how the ANA informed the US of the location of the facility.

It is very interesting that the US would move so quickly to claim an airstrike instead of a drone in the statement to the Times. Given Karzai's previous reactions to US airstrikes that have killed civilians, it is virtually guaranteed that he will reach a new high of outrage over this incident. There was a surge of nationalism over the incident where 21 troops were killed by the Taliban recently in Kunar (see the state funeral footage in this post), so look for Karzai to play off those sentiments in turning that anger now toward the US rather than the Taliban.