

NEW PROBLEMS WITH DOD'S MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES STORY

Count me as thoroughly unimpressed by DOD's explanation of what its almost two month long investigation into the attack on Médecins Sans Frontières' hospital in Kunduz showed.

Don't get me wrong: I still think this explanation – that the Afghans did knowingly attack the hospital, but that we didn't follow procedure and so became willing dupes in that attack – remains most likely. But DOD's explanation raises new questions for me (and clearly for some of the journalists at the briefing). Here's the video and transcript of today's press conference.

What do the Afghans say happened?

Back on October 5, General John Campbell said there would be three investigations: DOD's, NATO's, and an Afghan one.

I've got both U.S. 15-6 investigation, I've got a NATO investigation and the Afghans will be conducting an investigation.

Today, he suggested there were just two: his, and a joint NATO-Afghan one.

In addition to the U.S. national investigation, a NATO and Afghan partner combined civilian casualty assessment team, or CCAT, also conducted an investigation.

Campbell says these two investigations came to "generally consistent" conclusions, which is funny because in the days after the attack the Afghans were perfectly willing to say they

targeted the hospital intentionally.

What the Afghans say, or would say, if they were conducting their own investigation, is key, given some of the ambiguity in this description Campbell gave.

During the evening of October 2nd, Afghan SOF advised the U.S. SOF commander that they intended to conduct a clearing operation that night. This included a former national director of security, or NDS, headquarters building they believed was occupied by insurgents. The Afghans requested U.S. close air support as they conducted their clearing operation. The U.S. SOF commander agreed to have the support on standby. He remained at the PCOP compound during the operation and was beyond the visual range of either the [National Director of Security] headquarters or the MSF trauma center as he monitored the progress of his Afghan counterparts.

If the operation only “included” NDS, did it also “include” MSF? As the WaPo pointed out at the presser, DOD had already hit NDS.

Q: Yes. (inaudible) – Washington Post. A few hours before the MSF strike, an NDS building and buildings surrounding were actually struck by U.S. airstrikes. So the location was totally known. How do you – how do you account for this discrepancy a few hours later? The coordinate shift, and as you say, the MSF hospital was mistaken for the NDS building when just a few hours earlier, there had been an attack, had been – (inaudible) – there and had a strike in that area.

GEN. SHOFFNER: The investigation found that the U.S. special operations forces commander did rely on information

provided by the Afghan partners on the location of the NDS compound. However, the investigation determined that those grid coordinates given by the Afghan forces to that NDS compound were correct.

And per Campbell's statement, the Afghan description of the target matched the MSF hospital.

The physical description of the NDS headquarters building provided by the Afghan SOF to the U.S. SOF commander roughly matched the description of the MSF trauma center as seen by the aircrew.

And SOF relied on their description.

The investigation also found that the U.S. SOF commander relied primarily upon information provided by Afghan partners and was unable to adequately distinguish between the NDS headquarters building at the MSF Trauma Center.

Reporter Lynn O'Donnell asked about earlier Afghan admissions they had targeted MSF.

The other thing that interests me about this is that Afghan officials have said all along that the hospital – they specifically referred to the hospital as they command and control center for the insurgents. So you know, when did the NDS come into this? In the process of making the decision whether or not to continue with the attack, when does the NDS come into this?

In response, flack Brigadier General Wilson Shoffner (Campbell didn't respond to the questions from the press) gave a bullshit answer, one relying on what appears to be a substitution of two separate Afghan and NATO

investigations into one.

To the second part of your question, I won't speak for Minister (Stanikzine ?), but I will point out that on the civilian casualty assessment team investigation that was done, that wasn't just a U.S. investigation. It was a NATO investigation. The members of the team consisted of coalition partners, U.S. and non-U.S. It consisted of seven Afghans that were appointed by President Ghani.

On the civilian casualty assessment team, and I need to point out the purpose of that was different from the 15-6. It was intentionally narrow in purpose. It was designed to determine the basic facts and then to validate whether or not these civilian casualties had occurred. It did that. And the results of the civilian casualty assessment team report informed the 15-6 investigation.

It seems very likely DOD reframed the investigations such that what the Afghans admitted, by themselves, back in October, would not make it into any official investigation.

What happened to the US TAA role?

On October 5, Campbell insisted US SOF was only involved in a Train, Advise, and Assist role (which is what the Administration has said they were doing).

GEN. CAMPBELL: What I said was that the Afghans asked for air support from a special forces team that we have on the ground providing train, advise and assist in Kunduz.

He said that in spite of contemporary, DOD-

sourced reporting making it clear it wasn't the case.

Today, he not only admitted US forces were fighting but offered the extent of their fighting as part of an explanation.

By October 3rd, U.S. S0F had remained at the PCOP compound longer than intended in continued support of Afghan forces. As a result, by the early morning hours of October 3rd, U.S. S0F at the PCOP compound had been engaged in heavy fighting for nearly five consecutive days and nights.

I'm sure they were toast, don't get me wrong. But why did Campbell try to hide this detail back in October, when he was walking back Secretary Ash Carter's claim that US forces ordered the strike?

How did all the recording devices on the plane malfunction?

It's remarkable that all the recording devices on the plane "misfunctioned." [See below for clarification.]

During the flight, the electronic systems onboard the aircraft malfunctioned, preventing the operation of an essential command and control capability and eliminating the ability of aircraft to transmit video, send and receive e-mail or send and receive electronic messages. This is an example of technical failure.

As well as its sensors.

U.S. S0F commander provided the aircraft with the correct coordinates to the NDS headquarters building, the intended target of the Afghan S0F. The green 1

depicts the location of the NDS compound. Again, this was the building that the U.S. SOf commander intended to strike. But when the aircrew entered the coordinates into their fire control systems, the coordinates correlated to an open field over 300 meters from the NDS headquarters. The yellow 2 on the chart depicts the location of the open field.

This mistake happened because the aircraft was several miles beyond its normal orbit and its sensors were degraded at that distance.

Pretty remarkable that DOD has such a clear idea of what happened when, even though all the equipment they would use to determine that failed.

The question is all the more important given a discrepancy between the DOD narrative and MSF's: Timing.

Campbell said the attack lasted only 29 minutes, and ended as soon as SOf's commander realized his mistake (how did the pilots find out without fully functioning communications equipment?).

The strike began at 2:08 a.m. At 2:20 a.m., a SOf officer at Bagram received a call from MSF, advising that their facility was under attack. It took the headquarters and the U.S. special operations commander until 2:37 a.m. to realize the fatal mistake. At that time, the AC-130 had already ceased firing. The strike lasted for approximately 29 minutes.

MSF said the attack lasted an hour.

According to all accounts the US airstrikes started between 2.00am and 2.08am on 3 October.

[snip]

It is estimated that the airstrikes lasted approximately one hour, with some accounts saying the strikes continued for one hour and fifteen minutes, ending approximately 3am–3.15am.

Admittedly, MSF's far more detailed timeline did not describe calls from Kunduz to DOD, but from Kabul.

- At 2.19am, a call was made from MSF representative in Kabul to Resolute Support in Afghanistan informing them that the hospital had been hit in an airstrike
- At 2.20am, a call was made from MSF representative in Kabul to ICRC informing them that the hospital had been hit in an airstrike
- At 2.32am a call was made from MSF Kabul to OCHA Civil Military (CivMil) liaison in Afghanistan to inform of the ongoing strikes
- At 2.32am a call was made by MSF in New York to US Department of Defense contact in Washington informing of the airstrikes
- At 2.45am an SMS was received from OCHA CivMil in Afghanistan to MSF in Kabul confirming that the information had been passed through “several channels”
- At 2.47am, an SMS was sent from MSF in Kabul to Resolute Support in Afghanistan informing that one staff was confirmed dead and many were unaccounted for
- At 2.50am MSF in Kabul informed Afghan Ministry of Interior at Kabul level of the airstrikes. Afghan Ministry of Interior replied that he would contact ground forces
- At 2.52am a reply was received by MSF

in Kabul from Resolute Support stating "I'm sorry to hear that, I still do not know what happened"

– At 2.56am an SMS was sent from MSF in Kabul to Resolute Support insisting that the airstrikes stop and informing that we suspected heavy casualties

– At 2.59am an SMS reply was received by MSF in Kabul from Resolute Support saying "I'll do my best, praying for you all"

– At 3.04am an SMS was sent to Resolute Support from MSF in Kabul that the hospital was on fire

– At 3.07am an SMS was sent from MSF in Kabul to OCHA CivMil that the hospital was on fire

– At 3.09am an SMS was received by MSF in Kabul from OCHA CivMil asking if the incoming had stopped

– At 3.10am and again at 3.14am, follow up calls were made from MSF New York to the US Department of Defense contact in Washington regarding the ongoing airstrikes

– At 3.13am an SMS was sent from MSF in Kabul to OCHA CivMil saying that incoming had stopped

Note the call between MSF and SOF mentioned by DOD does not appear on MSF's log, nor does DOD say where it came from. *That is, both timelines are inconsistent.* DOD's timeline should fairly raise questions about MSF's timeline.

But DOD sure doesn't want to answer questions about this apparent inconsistency when called on it.

Q: Jim Miklaszewski from NBC News.
General, Doctors Without Borders, which has proven to be a pretty reliable

source in regard to what happened there in Kunduz, said that they made at least two phone calls, one just prior to and one during the airstrike, to the Pentagon. And we've been told that that information was relayed from Joint Staff to the NMCC that they were under attack.

Did that information ever reach the operators there in the battlefield?

GEN. SHOFFNER: What I'd like to do is, to better answer that question, just briefly review the sequence of events leading up to the issue at hand. Approximately 12 minutes after the firing commenced, Doctors Without Borders called to report the attack. Unfortunately, by the time U.S. forces realized the mistake, the aircraft had stopped firing.

What DOD is *not* telling us is who communicated the troops on the ground and in the plane when. Would that focus too much attention on the rather incredible claim that all the plane's recording equipment failed?

Or rather, malfunctioned. While Campbell says this was a technical failure, he doesn't really explain that part of it.

[Clarification: As Lemon Slayer notes, this is probably not all communications but instead just the plane's data link. They still should have had voice communication. I agree, though I also think DOD wanted to leave the impression there were no comms because the likelihood there were voice comms raises more questions, from the claim the plane left on an emergency deployment then got rerouted without any vetting of its mission, such as the fact that it didn't ask questions about why it was attacking a field, such as the likelihood (which Lemon Slayer notes) that there should be voice recording then. In other words, if they have voice comms—and they probably do—then they have more

information then they let on and less excuse for the purported confusion here.]

Again, it's not just me not buying this—it's the beat journalists too, many of whom asked precisely the right questions. And all the flacks did in response was to say some involved didn't abide by rules of engagement and that the US would never attack a hospital intentionally.

Would the US playing willing dupe for allies doing just that?

Update: They decided they had to hide Afghan side of investigation after first one was done.

Yesterday, DOD said it took three weeks to conduct an investigation.

They spent a full three weeks completing their report

Three weeks from when Campbell announced the investigation on October 5 would have been October 26 – a month before the report was released. But remember that Campbell brought in a two-star General on October 24, when the first three week period was coming to a close.

With an initial military assessment confirming civilian casualties in the bombing of a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz by an American warplane, Gen. John F. Campbell, the American commander in Afghanistan, has appointed a two-star general from another command to conduct an independent investigation, his office said in a statement on Saturday.

[snip]

A spokesman for General Campbell, Brig. Gen. Wilson Shoffner, said an assessment

team had “determined that the reports of civilian casualties were credible.” The investigation, which will be conducted by three senior officers outside General Campbell’s command, will be led by Maj. Gen. William B. Hickman and supported by two brigadier generals.

General Campbell, also the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, said: “My intent is to disclose the findings of the investigation once it is complete. We will be forthright and transparent and we will hold ourselves accountable for any mistakes made.”

Which came – now that I re-read the report of this – at the same moment when the Afghans made it clear their investigation into how they lost Kunduz would not cover how they asked the Americans to bomb a hospital.

The comments from Afghan officials came without a clear investigation on their side. While they have said a nongovernmental fact-finding mission set up to investigate the fall of Kunduz to the Taliban on Sept. 28 would also look into the hospital bombing, it is now clear that the mandate does not extend that far.

“The mandate of the Kunduz fact-finding mission doesn’t cover events beyond Sept. 28,” said Amrullah Saleh, a former intelligence chief who is a leader of the mission. “The team focuses on finding reasons for failure in leadership, structures and resources management.”

So if it takes three weeks to investigate an attack on a hospital, did the Brigadier General who first investigated it discover after three weeks that they needed to stop the Afghans from telling their own side of the story, after which

a higher ranking general conducted a new investigation without that information?

Normally, when you bring in higher ranking generals, it's because the scope of the investigation newly includes people who rank at the same level as the original investigating officer; but here, the guy who got disciplined is a captain [one report says he is a major], so not high ranking enough to require a two-star.

And if that investigation took three weeks, it would have ended November 14, 11 days before they released the report. Which if you hadn't already figured out was a deliberate attempt to bury the report in the pre-holiday rush, should now.