

SOMETHING FISHY

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUN 22 2009

Afghanistan is a country of 33,000,000 people that has been at war for 30 years, has a life expectancy of only 44 years, an infant mortality rate 151/1000 births, and experiences about 660,000 deaths from all causes per year. Life is hard, brutal and short in Afghanistan where the ethnic divisions are sharp and communications limited by harsh terrain and even harsher poverty.

Coalition forces are fighting a cruel enemy in Afghanistan who uses suicide bombers against civilians. I recall recent video of Afghan schoolchildren happily walking near a military checkpoint on their way home and being killed by in a bombing as a truck speeds into view and detonates. The Taliban threaten collaborators with public executions. Whole families have paid the price for the resistance of a few. The government is by all accounts corrupt. Americans who have had tours there report that they are struck by the culture of lying that pervades Afghanistan.

The UN has said that 2,118 civilians died in the Afghanistan war last year, more than 60 percent at the hand of the Taliban and its friends. Of the 829 attributed to coalition action 552 were said to be from air strikes. During that year coalition forces flew over 19,000 close air support sorties and dropped 3,369 munitions. Precision weapons and better procedures obviously limit the collateral damage of air operations in Afghanistan. In the Second World War allied operations, artillery as well as air strikes, killed 50,000 French civilians. In Vietnam the air delivered munitions vastly exceeded that dropped in all theaters in the Second World War.

And yet claims that over a hundred civilians were killed in air strikes on May 4th in distant Farah province made in support of engaged coalition forces are widely circulated and believed, and now have become the cause for policy changes. The Afghan government, soon to face elections, seemed to endorse the claims. Despite on site investigations that found the numbers significantly exaggerated (on the order of five times) and no serious fault in the operation, American leaders up to the highest level have apologized and offered compensation. The new commander in Afghanistan, General McChrystal, has just said that air operations will be further restricted.

Death is a frequent visitor in Afghanistan, mostly not because of war. Air power is our advantage especially in a country where our forces are spread thin and the distances are large. Precautions have limited greatly the number of weapons dropped and how air power is employed. But only a little deception apparently is needed to put this advantage in jeopardy. Soldiers are still dying in Afghanistan. If there is no will to inflict casualties then there should be no will in absorbing them. Try as we may to avoid it, war kills the innocent.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War*

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