

Civilian toll undoes good deeds of US troops

By Gethin Chamberlain in Kabul, Sunday Telegraph

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• US helicopter medics in action

Sitting in her hospital bed with a plastic patch taped over her left eye, Robina ud Din was a picture of misery.

The red-haired two-year-old had been flown to the US military hospital in Bagram, outside Kabul, the Afghan capital, after being injured when American soldiers opened fire on her family's car at a checkpoint in the eastern town of Khost.

Glass fragments ripped open her left eye, and she needed surgery to save her sight. The US military said the vehicle failed to stop when told to do so. But her family - who had been returning from her father's funeral - said soldiers had opened fire without warning.

If anything illustrates the contradictions in the [US approach to Afghanistan](#), it is cases such as that of Robina, in which coalition forces have played both villain and hero.

While thousands of troops fight a bitter battle against the Taliban, thousands of others are battling to get the country back on its feet and offer Afghans a viable alternative to the hardline Islamists.



Medics on a US medevac helicopter treat an injured soldier but they are frequently being called to civilian casualties

In the fight against the Taliban and its sympathisers, however, there are often unintended casualties - a fact which is now turning some Afghans against the Nato soldiers who came to help them.

advertisement Last week Afghans took to the streets in Herat, in the west, to protest at the killing of about 50 civilians whom the US said were mostly Taliban fighters - in an area not known for Taliban support.

President Hamid Karzai summoned Western diplomats to warn of "serious consequences for all" if civilian deaths were not curbed. "The patience of the Afghan people is wearing thin with the continued killing of innocent civilians," he declared.

Mr Karzai said that the pursuit of the Taliban did not excuse the killing of innocent bystanders.

An editorial in the Afghanistan Times berated US troops for their conduct, saying: "Each time they kill or shoot at civilians, they provide grist to the Taliban's propaganda mill."

Yet every day, Americans also put their own lives on the line to help civilians caught in the conflict, flying into areas where they are at risk of attack.

Children account for about a quarter of the patients treated at the 36-bed Bagram hospital, run by US military doctors. Many of the youngsters have been injured by landmines buried in the fields, or by picking up unexploded weapons.

Robina was flown from the scene of the shooting to the hospital on board a US Blackhawk medevac (medical evacuation) helicopter. Such missions are flown across Afghanistan daily, and the aircrews all have similar stories to tell.

Chief Warrant Officer Jim Drake, a pilot operating from Qalat, 80 miles from Kandahar in the south of the country, said he had picked up seven children since January.

"I've picked up more kids injured by mines than we've had injured soldiers," he said.

"Two days ago we got a call to say some children had picked up some unexploded ordinance and it had blown one of the kids' feet off. When we got there one of them had his foot hanging off and one had an eviscerated bowel."

One of the children, a four-year-old boy, needed his leg amputated. Later a child was brought in with his stomach ripped open, having picked up a Coke can with an explosive hidden inside it.

Last week, The Sunday Telegraph saw another such victim, a five-year-old girl ferried by helicopter to a field hospital in Kandahar.

She had been playing with two of her brothers in countryside near Qalat, when a landmine exploded -killing the boys and leaving her with terrible leg injuries. Her parents sat by her bedside, too distraught to talk.

Between missions, the medevac crews spend long hours waiting, watching television, sleeping or playing video games.

When the call comes, crew members don body armour and strap on -pistols before walking quickly to their Blackhawk, where rifles are already stashed.

The rotors spin and the -helicopter taxis out to the runway, followed by a second Blackhawk helicopter with the job of escorting it. They lift into the air, skimming low and fast over the countryside to minimise the danger of attack from the ground.

Afghanistan has its own hospitals, but they cannot match the treatment offered by the US military. Doctors often refer patients to the Americans when they feel that there is nothing they can do.

At Bagram, Burhan Ullah, aged nine, recovering from having both legs amputated, had been the victim not of the fighting but of a road accident in which he was struck by a truck.

Doctors at his home town in Kunar province said he would fare better in the Americans' care.

Colonel Bart Iddins, commander of the US military medical unit at Bagram, said the boy's chances of survival were good, though he faces a future with little chance of receiving prosthetic limbs.

But a small proportion of the civilians treated by American medics have been wounded as a result of coalition action, and there are clear tensions as their families try to discuss that fact with the people treating them.

Robina's uncle, Rasul ud Din, said the family were travelling in two trucks when soldiers opened fire. "We were driving and they just shot us. They did not try to stop us, they just shot at us," he said.

Col Iddins chipped in. He said that, after suicide bomb attacks in the area, soldiers were wary of vehicles which seemed unprepared to stop.

"Unfortunately in warfare the enemy will target civilians and sometimes mistakes happen and innocents get caught in the crossfire," he said. "We try to do all we can to help." Alongside the medics on the Blackhawks

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