

The World; Afghans Say Civilians Died in Bombings; Governor says U.S. airstrikes have taken 17 lives as forces search for a missing unit. Victims may have been enemy's kin, the military says.

Kazem, Halima

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

U.S. airstrikes have killed 17 civilians in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, where the search for a U.S. special operations team has intensified, officials said.

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"U.S. forces regret the loss of innocent lives and follow stringent rules of engagement specifically to ensure that non-combatants are safeguarded," a U.S. military statement said. "However, when enemy forces move their families into the locations where they conduct terrorist operations, they put these innocent civilians at risk."

FULL TEXT

U.S. airstrikes have killed 17 civilians in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, where the search for a U.S. special operations team has intensified, officials said.

The strikes and searches are taking place in rugged Kunar province, where American troops have been fighting Taliban and Al Qaeda militants for more than two weeks.

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The U.S. military acknowledged some civilian casualties but would not confirm the number. It said the bombing site was identified as a compound for a mid-level terrorist leader and the civilians killed could have been members of his family.

"U.S. forces regret the loss of innocent lives and follow stringent rules of engagement specifically to ensure that non-combatants are safeguarded," a U.S. military statement said. "However, when enemy forces move their families into the locations where they conduct terrorist operations, they put these innocent civilians at risk."

The American special operations unit has been missing for about a week. Wafa said a second Navy SEAL from the unit had been located Monday, but a Pentagon official in Washington denied the report.

"My security officials have told me that the second U.S. soldier has not been picked up yet," Wafa said. "We have been told that he is in the hands of Afghans who are taking care of him."

The U.S. military commonly delays releasing information about military rescues to protect troops who have not been found.

The BBC reported Monday that U.S. government sources said two more members of the unit had been found dead. There was no official word from Washington or Kabul.

The military did confirm the rescue of a service member who reportedly was found Sunday and was being treated at a U.S. military base outside Kabul.

On June 28, a Chinook helicopter called to assist the unit was shot down, killing all 16 troops on board. The Chinook crashed after being hit by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Since then, hundreds of U.S. and Afghan troops have scoured the area's deep ravines in the hope of finding the reconnaissance team.

With landmark parliamentary elections scheduled for late September, violence has increased in the last three months. About 495 suspected insurgents, 49 Afghan police and soldiers, 157 civilians and 45 U.S. troops have been killed since March.

Taliban insurgents in Kandahar province gunned down a pro- government cleric in broad daylight Sunday. Maulvi Mohammed Nabi Masah was on the council of local religious leaders and the provincial parliamentary election council. He was widely known in Kandahar for criticizing Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

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DETAILS

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