

The Guardian

Kunduz hospital attack: US forces did not act on MSF warnings for 17 min

David Smith *in Washington*

Thu 26 Nov 2015 04.05 AEDT

US military commander blames human error and equipment failure for Kunduz hospital attack

US: human and tech error behind Kunduz hospital attack - video

US military commanders in Afghanistan took 17 minutes to act after being warned by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) that their aircraft was firing on a medical centre full of doctors and civilians, an internal investigation has found.

By the time officers made contact with the AC-130 gunship, which had mistaken the facility in Kunduz for a Taliban-controlled building several hundred metres away, it was too late. Thirty staff, patients and assistants were killed and 37 injured in one of the worst incidents of civilian casualties in the 14-year war.

The US military said on Wednesday that the report demonstrated its commitment to accountability and that some of those most closely involved had been suspended from duty pending disciplinary action. But MSF dismissed it as raising more questions than answers and blamed the frightening catalogue of mistakes on “gross negligence”.

The medical charity has previously condemned the airstrike as a “war crime” and demanded an international investigation. The US has been accused of changing its version of events four times in the days after the incident, which is now the subject of three inquiries - by the US, Nato and Afghanistan.

The military’s findings were presented by Gen John Campbell, the US commander in Afghanistan. “The strike began at 2.08am,” he said. “At 2.20am an SOF [special operations forces] officer at Bagram [airbase] received a call from MSF advising that their facility was under attack. It took the headquarters and the US special operations commander until 2.37am to realise the fatal mistake. At that time the AC-130 had already ceased firing. The strike lasted for approximately 29 minutes. This is an example of human process error.”

MSF has said it repeatedly gave the US military the GPS coordinates of its trauma centre to ensure it would not be targeted, most recently on 29 September. Campbell did not dispute this, blaming human error compounded by technical malfunctions and procedural failings.

He detailed a series of blunders that ended in tragedy. The aircraft took off without a normal mission brief or essential materials such as no-strike designations, which would have

identified the location of the MSF centre.

During the flight, the onboard electronic systems malfunctioned, preventing command-and-control operations and limiting the ability to send email or video. In addition, as it arrived in Kunduz, it also mistakenly reported that the aircraft had been targeted by a missile, putting it off course, and in turn degrading the accuracy of some targeting systems.

Even when these were corrected, the crew remained “fixated” on the physical description of their original target, Campbell admitted, even though there were some “contradictory indicators”.

The crew of the AC-130 gunship relied on a physical description of the compound provided by Afghan forces, which led the crew to attack the wrong target on 2 October. It said the intended target, thought to be under Taliban control and being used in part as a prison, was 450 metres away from the hospital.

The aircraft fired 211 shells at the compound. MSF said this month in its own report that several doctors and nurses were killed immediately, and patients who could not move burned to death in the ensuing fire. Hospital staff members made 18 attempts to call or text US and Afghan authorities, the group said.

Campbell told a press conference: “The medical facility was misidentified as a target by US personnel who believed they were striking a different building several hundred metres away where there were reports of combatants.

“The personnel who requested the strike and those who executed it from the air did not undertake appropriate measures to verify that the facility was a legitimate military target.”

He added: “Based upon the information learned during the investigation, the report determined that the proximate cause of this tragedy was the direct result of avoidable human error, compounded by process and equipment failures.

“In addition the report found fatigue and a high operational tempo contributed to this tragedy,” he said.



Christopher Stokes, the general director of MSF, stands at the gate of the organisation's hospital, after it was hit by a U.S. airstrike, in Kunduz, Afghanistan Photograph: Najim Rahim/AP

“It also identified failures in systems and processes that, while not the cause of the strike on the MSF trauma centre, contributed to the incident. These included the loss of electronic communications systems on the aircraft, the nature of the planning and approval process employed during operations in Kunduz city, and the lack of a single system to vet proposed targets against a no-strike list.

“We have reviewed each of these failures and implemented corrections as appropriate. We have learned from this terrible incident ... This was a tragic mistake. US forces would never intentionally strike a hospital or other protected facilities.”

MSF gave a lukewarm reception to the findings. Christopher Stokes, its general director, said: “The US version of events presented today leaves MSF with more questions than answers. It is shocking that an attack can be carried out when US forces have neither eyes on a target nor access to a no-strike list, and have malfunctioning communications systems.

“It appears that 30 people were killed and hundreds of thousands of people are denied life-saving care in Kunduz simply because the MSF hospital was the closest large building to an open field and ‘roughly matched’ a description of an intended target.”

He added: “The frightening catalogue of errors outlined today illustrates gross negligence on the part of US forces and violations of the rules of war. The destruction of a protected facility without verifying the target - in this case a functioning hospital full of medical staff and patients - cannot only be dismissed as individual human error or breaches of the US rules of engagement.

“MSF reiterates its call for an independent and impartial investigation into the attack on our hospital in Kunduz. Investigations of this incident cannot be left solely to parties to the conflict in Afghanistan.”

Following the earlier press conference, Campbell did not take questions, handing over to Brig Gen Wilson Shoffner, who refused to comment on whether Campbell would consider his position or whether an independent international investigation should be conducted.

Shoffner said the investigators interviewed 65 witnesses and produced 3,000 pages. “The investigation found that some of the US individuals involved did not follow the rules of engagement,” he said, adding: “We made a terrible mistake that led to unnecessary deaths.

“We will do everything possible to prevent this happening again,” he said. “We would never, ever do anything to unnecessarily harm innocent civilians.”

Topics

- Médecins Sans Frontières
- Afghanistan
- US military
- South and Central Asia
- news