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Afghan killings exacerbate worsening perception problem for U.S.

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WASHINGTON — Instead of the promised orderly exit from a decade-long war, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan now appears to be stumbling from one disaster to the next.

The weekend massacre of at least 16 Afghan civilians, allegedly committed by a rogue U.S. Army staff sergeant, caps a string of recent crises that are ratcheting up the danger American troops face in Afghanistan even as they struggle to extricate themselves from a conflict that is increasingly unpopular with the American public.

The killings of the civilians, most of them women and children, came less than a month after U.S. troops burned Qurans at a detention center in Kabul, triggering days of Afghan riots and unrest and the killings of six American servicemembers by enraged Afghan security forces. And just weeks before that, a video of U.S. Marines urinating on the corpses of Taliban militants sparked revulsion in Afghanistan and a U.S. military investigation into possible American violations of the Geneva Conventions.

Taken as a whole, the incidents beg the question of whether the White House's announced 2014 date for withdrawing from Afghanistan, once viewed as a speedy end to the war, is now too slow for a mission that some critics assert is spiraling out of control.

Administration officials quickly labeled the murders of the Afghan civilians as a tragic but isolated incident. Pentagon spokesman George Little added that "despite what some people might be saying out there, we are absolutely not changing our fundamental strategy in Afghanistan."

White House officials said President Barack Obama spoke to Afghan President Hamid Karzai on Sunday to emphasize that point, noting that the attacker would be held accountable but that the killings did not change "our deep respect for the Afghan people and the bonds between our two countries."

But Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, in a television appearance hours after the attack, said that the U.S. approach in Afghanistan now is "risking the lives of young men and women in a mission that may frankly not be doable." His rival, Rick Santorum, said Obama either needs to commit more troops to the fight or "get out sooner" than 2014.

Democrats on Capitol Hill have been softer in their criticism, pushing for a quicker withdrawal without attacking the president's strategy.

House Armed Services Committee ranking member Adam Smith, D-Wash., said that "incidents such as this underscore the fact that after 10 years of war, it is time to bring our troops home as soon as we responsibly can."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid called the continued U.S. presence there "not a good situation" but offered support for Obama's timetable.

A recent Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 54 percent of Americans polled want U.S. forces out of Afghanistan as soon as possible, even if that means not fully training their Afghan replacements. Three-fifths of those interviewed said the fight there has not been worth it.

Inside Afghanistan, support for two more years of U.S. presence is likely to decline even further after the latest incident.

“The fundamental issue is that people don’t like foreign troops coming in and telling them what to do with their affairs,” said Chris Preble, vice president for foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. “Even when that foreign presence is well conducted — which I generally think the U.S. presence has been — you can’t expect that kind of goodwill to hold for 10 years.”

But Little said that the administration will not execute the war effort “by the polls,” and that the U.S. is committed to the withdrawal plan.

“You can’t necessarily take an isolated incident, or two, or three, and draw a broader trend line on progress in Afghanistan,” Little said.

Yet that’s precisely what many Americans will do, according to James Carafano, foreign policy expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

He echoed that the war can’t be successful if leaders simply follow polls, although he advocated increased U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan, not a quicker drawdown. “I don’t know why people are shocked that things aren’t going well,” he said. “[The military] wasn’t given enough troops and wasn’t given enough time.”

International Security Force officials have promised that they will investigate and appropriately punish the soldier accused of murdering civilians. But they also insisted that “this deeply appalling incident in no way represents the values of ISAF and coalition troops or the abiding respect we feel for the Afghan people.”

The recent U.S. missteps in Afghanistan also raised anew questions about whether the U.S. military is so stressed and depleted after a decade of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that order and discipline is now breaking down.

“Certainly in any organization there are going to be troubled individuals, but both the spoiling of the Taliban corpses and the burning of the Koran were, it seems to me, avoidable incidents,” said John Nagl, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who now teaches at the U.S. Naval Academy. “The organization of the U.S. military has been under enormous stress for the last decade, but there is nothing that excuses something like this.”

A 2010 Army report, spearheaded by then-Vice Chief of Staff Peter Chiarelli, blamed many of the struggles the Army was facing with soldiers on a deterioration of leadership at home that “appears to be worsening as the requirements of prolonged conflict slowly erode the essential attributes that have defined the Army for generations.”

Bart Billings, a retired Army colonel and psychologist, said that “the Army isn’t broken down, but there are certain people within the Army who are broken down.”

Billings said he wasn’t surprised that the killing of civilians occurred, noting that post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, high divorce rates and increased crime and substance abuse are all symptoms of a fatigued force that lacks adequate screening and holistic readiness measurements before and after deployments.

The problems are compounded, Billings said, by troops being heavily medicated both at war and at home.

“Pills are passed out like candy,” he said.

On Monday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney dismissed suggestions that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is now creating more harm than good.

“I don’t think there is any doubt that we’ve had success ... making life harder for Al Qaida there,” he said. “But there’s no question this is hard ... we’ve been there a long time.”

Reporters Jennifer Hlad, Chris Carroll, Megan McCloskey and Bill Murphy Jr. contributed to this report.