

Campaign believed carefully executed

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The Taliban have played the collateral-damage card, one of the few available to a small force that faces an overwhelming adversary. Yesterday, the Afghan regime said that as many as 100 civilians were killed in the bombing of a hospital.

Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, said it was further evidence of the appalling nature of the U.S. war on terrorism. "The goal is to punish the Afghan people for having chosen an Islamic system," he said.

The assertion that a Herat hospital was bombed is the latest in a series of Taliban announcements about Afghan civilian casualties. But military and political analysts believe the U.S.-led campaign has been a carefully executed operation.

Most say it compares favorably with other modern conflicts, including 1999's Operation Allied Force in Yugoslavia and the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf.

The campaign in Yugoslavia resulted in about 500 civilian deaths. About 3,000 Iraqi civilians are believed to have died in the war in the Persian Gulf.

Gordon Smith, the director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, said it's hard to know how many civilians have been killed or wounded in the raids on Afghanistan.

"Until there is some independent verification, no one can know what the truth really is. I have no doubt that some civilians have died, but who can tell how many? The Taliban and Osama bin Laden are masters of propaganda," Mr. Smith said.

"We have been presented with shocking images, but how do we know how many of them are real? When we are shown photographs of dead and injured children, how do we know whether they were taken yesterday or six months ago?"

Jim Hanson, associate executive director of the Toronto-based Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, said the Afghanistan campaign has not been a general assault against the country and its civilian population.

Instead, it has amounted to a near-textbook example of a surgical military operation, he said.

"From what I have seen so far, I would say that this could be favourably compared to the gulf or Kosovo campaigns."

The U.S.-led campaign has resulted in at least one high-profile mistake: On Oct. 16, a Red Cross depot in Kabul was bombed.

Earlier, a United Nations-funded demining office was hit, killing four people, and the Taliban say U.S. bombs flattened a village near the eastern city of Jalalabad, killing at least 160 people.

Other recent military conflicts also have been noted for military errors, such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and a misdirected cruise missile attack during the Persian Gulf war. Alliance forces targeted a bunker they had identified as a hideout for Iraqi military officials, only to learn it had been filled with women and children.

The resulting publicity dealt a serious blow to Washington's efforts to portray the war as a surgical operation. Analysts warn that public support for the campaign against Afghanistan could be quickly eroded by a series of similar mistakes.

"You cannot allow the perception to grow that this is a war against Afghanistan, or against Islam," Mr. Smith said.

Jim Bayer, dean of Royal Roads University's Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, said any war demands an acceptance of the cruel fact that not all casualties will be military.

"You cannot have an absolutely surgical war . . . You can try to limit collateral damage. But you will never eliminate it.

"From what I've seen, this war has been about as surgical as you can get."