

## Kunduz hospital tragedy unlikely to focus west on Afghans' plight

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Afghan government forces during fighting with Taliban militants in Kunduz © Getty Images

Doctors and nurses of the international medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières abandoned its bombed hospital in the Afghan city of Kunduz on Sunday after 22 people — including 12 of its staff and three children — were killed and 37 seriously wounded by American missiles early on Saturday morning.

It was the only functioning hospital in a city of 300,000 where the Taliban and Afghan government forces have been fighting for control for a week. MSF has called for an independent international inquiry into the bombing.

The attack has created an international scandal, with the US military in the dock at the same time as President Barack Obama has been trying to persuade Russia to target the Islamic militant group Isis in Syria rather than other anti-regime forces and civilian targets. Just hours before the attack, the US and some of its coalition allies, including Britain, had issued a statement condemning Russia for causing civilian casualties in Syria.

The bombing of a western non-governmental organisation by a western power — even if it was a tragic mistake — and the closure of the hospital is certain to persuade other NGOs in Afghanistan to pull out, just when Afghans are facing a massive Taliban offensive and a collapsing economy.

Moreover, fighting has now spread across northern and western Afghanistan and it is highly unlikely that medical services — local or foreign — will be available to ordinary Afghans in these war zones. Doctors are fleeing their posts, the Taliban have no medical support for their troops while Afghan civilians are heavily dependent on foreign medical NGOs for treating war wounds.

The bombing set the hospital on fire and survivors said that patients unable to escape burnt to death in their beds. Bodies including those of women, children and doctors were scattered in the ruins; 12 of the 19 dead were hospital staff — all Afghans, including the head of the hospital.

Doctors in regional clinics where some of the wounded were taken fled their premises in fear, leaving the patients on their own. "The entire system has broken...no doctors, no nurses," [Saad Mukhtar, director of public health for Kunduz](#), was quoted in the New York Times. MSF won the Nobel Peace Prize for its work in 1999 and operates in 20 countries.

Meanwhile, fighting has continued in the city amid the government counter-offensive to try to drive the Taliban out. The Taliban have taken more towns and districts around Kunduz and in Badakhshan province, which borders China and Pakistan.

MSF officials have said that the hospital's location was well known to all those involved in the fighting — Afghan troops, the Taliban and US pilots who were bombing Taliban positions.

The US military in Kabul issued a statement confirming one US air strike that was aimed at Taliban firing upon US troops and may have caused "collateral damage" to a medical facility. The Kabul government was more blunt, claiming that Taliban fighters were using the hospital as a firing base — [which MSF strongly denies](#).

The GPS location was last conveyed to all parties just three days before the air strike. Several MSF officials said that when the bombing started the charity's officials spoke to US officials asking them to stop but the bombing continued for 30 minutes more.

It was more than 12 hours before US officials in Washington responded and said that they would [launch an investigation](#). "The event is utterly tragic, inexcusable, and possibly even criminal," said [Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini](#), the UN high commissioner for human rights.

The tragic loss of life is coupled with a huge blow to the credibility of Washington and Kabul in being able to tackle the Taliban and win international and Afghan support for doing so. There is already widespread anger among many Afghans at the US and Nato for pulling out their troops when the country still faces a huge Taliban threat.

Afghanistan has seen international aid dwindle and the economy has taken a huge hit this year due to capital flight, the Taliban offensive and the lack of a clear economic strategy by the government. President Ashraf Ghani has faced scathing criticism from many Afghans for being unable to persuade Mr Obama to keep US forces in the country beyond next year, his failure to salvage the economy and making an unsuccessful tryst with — which has now collapsed. His government is now being heavily criticised for defending the bombing of the hospital.

The US attack has bought Afghanistan back on to the international agenda, but this poor country that has been in a continuous state of war since 1978 is unlikely to be able to attract enough attention from other issues such as Russia's bombing of rebel forces in Syria to draw a major offer of rescue from the west.