

that tailing off if you can get more troops in there?

GEN. CONWAY: Yeah, Dave, if the reports of the Afghan civilian casualties are accurate -- and sometimes that is a big "if" because I think we all understand the Taliban capabilities with regard to information operations -- but if that proves out, that will be truly an unfortunate incident. And we need to avoid that, certainly, at every cost.

But I don't necessarily tie the two together. You know, air power is the premiere asymmetric advantage that we hold over both the Taliban and, for that matter, the al Qaeda in Iraq. They have no light capability. And when we find that you're up against hardened people in a hardened type of compound, before we throw our Marines or soldiers against that, we're going to take advantage of our asymmetric advantage -- being, again, the ability to strike from the air.

You don't always know what's in that compound, unfortunately.

And sometimes we think there's been overt efforts on the part of the Taliban, in particular, to surround themselves with civilians so as to, at a minimum, reap an IO advantage if civilians are killed. But I think it is a tactic that has proven valuable to us in the past, in terms of saving lives, to reduce a compound through air strike if there's simply no other way.

There is an escalation of effort that goes against a building like that. I mean, my guys told me of an incident up near the lakes north of Haditha where they had people surrounded. They actually wanted to gain intelligence and sensitive site exploitation value from preserving the compound. So they went through a whole range of escalatory procedures to try to get these guys to throw away their weapons. They did not; they would not. After a time, they dropped a 250-pound bomb on them, as opposed to a thousand- or 2,000-pound bomb, which incapacitated or killed the people inside but saved the intelligence value.

So we've learned to operate inside our own systems to be as effective as we can. And so I think we'll continue to drop bombs. We will also continue at every effort to preserve civilian lives who unfortunately are a part of the battlefield.

Q General --

Q Just to follow up -- just one --

Q Go ahead. Go ahead.

Q Could you explain again why that environment and the enemy tactics make it so difficult at times to conduct clean air strikes?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, if you're familiar with the ground -- first of all, it's difficult terrain. And the compounds will house a number of buildings. Oftentimes, there is wall outside several structures -- by the way, wall will serve to contain blasts, and that's one of the mechanical aspects of it that make it -- make it dangerous for people that might be in the area. But it's the nature of you striking the compound. You want to strike the precise building that you're targeting, but sometimes there are other people there. And you don't know that, because you're not on the inside looking out.

Sometimes it's a conscious tactic of these people who meet to make sure there are civilians -- kids playing in the compound so that they're seen, and that complicates your targeting methodology. This is a dirty game being played but, again, we are as precise as we can. And it's not unusual at all to come off of a target and say, "I can't drop a bomb there. We'll be killing kids," if we know that they're in the area.

So it's just -- it's a tactic that's being used against us. It's the nature of the way construction takes place there. And the enemy is using all those things against us to try to counter this asymmetric advantage.

Q General, staying in Afghanistan, as you know, the 24th MEU and 2/7 Marines are coming back in November. Are you saying the only way you can backfill them is if you reduce Marines in Anbar?