An Afghan girl and her donkey on April 14, 2017 in the mountainous area where the US a day earlier dropped the world's biggest non-nuclear bomb targeting ISIL caves in Achin district, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan. Ghulamullah Habibi / EPA

‘It was the sound of hell’ say Afghans from the site of the megabomb blast

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ISIL death toll more than 90 from huge US bomb in Afghanistan
The world’s biggest non-nuclear bomb was ‘the right weapon for the right target’ against ISIL in Afghanistan, says US commander
36 ISIL militants killed in US bombing in Afghanistan
The ‘mother of all bombs’ is Trump’s message to all America’s enemies
US drops ‘Mother Of All Bombs’ on ISIL in Afghanistan – video

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KABUL //The blast of the massive bomb that fell in the Momand Valley "was the sound of hell", said Pacha, a resident of the district.

The explosion was heard and felt as far away as Jalalabad, 58 kilometres to the south.

"Relatives called us from those areas to ask how we are, and it was heard in Torkham, Morko, Khogyani and the rest of Nangarhar," he said. "It was very, very big, very strong, it shattered the windows and doors in our house. It made everyone feel as though we were going to disappear."

Most of the families living at the mouth of the Momand Valley, the last redoubt of the fighters from IS-Khorasan (ISK), the ISIL affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, had left because of the fighting between ISIL and the Afghan security forces, backed by US special operations advisers. The militants were encircled in this corner of Achin, a remote district of east Afghanistan and the last redoubt of the fighters from IS-Khorasan (ISK), ISIL’s affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But some civilians remained, Pacha said. "Daesh is in power there but our relatives and tribe are still there," he said. "There must be very big casualties and destruction but we can’t go there to see if our relatives are all right."

In fact, no civilian casualties have been reported.

The valley is honeycombed with a network of tunnels and caves that have been excavated by villagers for mining as well as by Afghan insurgents dating back to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

Because of the terrain, the battle had become bogged down at the mouth of the small valley called Asadkhel, said Pacha. It was there that an American special forces sergeant was killed a week ago. For days, the Afghan forces were unable to make any progress against the militants.
The ISIL fighters had built trenches, and laid roadside bombs Pacha added. A handful of militants had set up heavy machine gun positions among the headstones of a graveyard in Chinar village, in upper Asadkhel at the gateway to the valley.

At least four operations to dislodge them failed. "Many troops were killed and among them a foreigner," Pacha said. "I saw the ambulance helicopter myself come and take them. All the heavy weapons and bombardment were useless [against the extremists]. Drones tried to finish them, jets tried, helicopters tried — each of them tried a lot but could not break the battle lines."

The paved roads in and around the valley had been badly damaged by flood waters over the winter, which made fighting even more difficult.

Then on Thursday at around 5pm, Afghan and US commandos went to every house all the villages within a kilometre of Asadkhel, including Pacha’s, telling residents to keep their windows open but to stay inside with their families because later in the day there would be a large bombing.

Now, Afghan and US forces have cordoned off the area, and while the heavy weapons fire has stopped, some militants are still there firing small arms at the coalition forces, Pacha said.

Whatever the tactical success of the bombing, the terror caused by the blast as well as any civilian casualties that emerge could prove counter-productive, driving up support for the Taliban or even ISIL.

"We called this an illegal bomb," Pacha said. "We are very poor and weak — now they use such a weapon on us?"

But other local residents took a different view. Mohammad Hakim had only praise for the strike. "We are very happy and these kinds of bombs should be used in future as well, so Daesh is rooted out from here," he said. "They killed our women, youths and elders, sitting them on mines. We also ask the Kabul government to use even stronger weapons against them."

Another resident, Hakim Kham, 50, said, "I want a hundred times more bombings on this group.

The US estimates 600 to 800 IS fighters are present in Afghanistan, mostly in Nangarhar. The US has concentrated heavily on combating them while also supporting Afghan forces battling the Taliban. President Donald Trump called Thursday’s operation a "very, very successful mission".