

Who is the US military slaughtering in eastern Afghanistan?

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In what is being billed as the largest battle of the war in Afghanistan, a US-led force has over the last week killed an estimated 500 fighters near Gardez in the eastern Paktia province. The US and allied troops have suffered minimal casualties in an unequal contest, in which Kalashnikovs and mortars have been pitted against the latest American hi-tech weaponry, including attack helicopters, precision-guided munitions and thermobaric bombs, designed to suck oxygen from defensive cave complexes.

US commanders have openly gloated over the one-sided slaughter. “On Tuesday we caught several hundred of them with RPGs and mortars heading towards the fight. We bodyslammed them and killed hundreds of those guys,” Major General Frank Hagenbeck commented. Describing another incident, a senior defence official told the *Washington Post*: “About 100 to 200 Al Qaeda ran out of the caves, probably thinking we were going to bomb them inside. We rolled in on them with A-10s [heavily-armed warplanes designed to attack tank columns].”

US military spokesmen routinely refer to the enemy as “Al Qaeda and Taliban holdouts”—a description that is uncritically parroted in the international media. When, despite the preponderance of weaponry arraigned against them, the opposition fighters offered stiff resistance, they became “hard-core Taliban” and “terrorist fighters,” said to be bolstered by hundreds of Arabs, Chechens and Uzbeks. *Associated Press* reported: “In the hallways of the Pentagon, the Al Qaeda men fighting and dying in the frigid mountains of eastern Afghanistan are called ‘dead-enders’.”

No evidence is offered for any of these assertions—other than the fact that the US military machine has encountered opposition. The enemy is designated “Al Qaeda” and “terrorist” to maintain the fiction that the fighting in eastern Afghanistan has a link to the September 11 attacks and to justify the slaughter taking place. US Vice President Richard Cheney ruled out any negotiations with the opposition. The only way to end the threat, he said, “is to get the terrorists before they launch more attacks against us.”

A number of reports from Gardez point to a different story,

however. An article in the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, explained that those fighting American troops were being led by Saifur Rahman Mansour, who “to many [was] a home-grown hero,” rather than a close associate of Osama bin Laden. Thought to be about 40, Rahman is the son of a former Paktia governor and fought with US-backed Mujaheddin groups against the Soviet installed regime in Kabul in the 1980s.

Like many of local militia commanders among the Pashtun tribes in the south and east of Afghanistan, Rahman threw in his lot with the Taliban. The Islamic extremist movement expanded rapidly in the mid-1990s not primarily by defeating opposing militia units but either by buying them off or winning support for their vision of an Islamic state as the alternative to the existing chaos. Once the US compelled Pakistan to end its support for the Taliban, effectively choking off funds and arms, the patchwork of alliances with Pashtun tribal leaders and militia commanders swiftly disintegrated.

Afghan officials in Gardez, whose current allegiances lie with the US and its puppet administration in Kabul, all know Rahman. Some fought alongside him during the 1980s as part of the anti-Soviet Mujaheddin which sheltered in cave complexes in the Shahi Kot Valley where the fighting presently is taking place. They pay tribute to his tenacity as a fighter and question the purpose of the US-led Operation Anaconda. As Abdul Mutin, commander of a US-allied militia, admitted: “There are some people who say: ‘Saifur Rahman is a nice person. Why must we fight him?’”

Safi Ullah, spokesman for the provincial shura or administrative council, commented: “He is famous in his native place, among his people, and now people don’t really like him because he has stood against the interim government. The shura of Gardez asked him in the first days after the fall of the Taliban to surrender and not to gather people around him against the government. But he did anyway.”

Negotiations broke down amid claims that Rahman was sheltering Al Qaeda fighters—a loose term applied to any

foreigners, including hundreds of inexperienced youth from Pakistan and the Middle East who flocked to defend the Taliban regime last year. Up to the last, Rahman insisted that he was harbouring no foreigners and called on the Gardez shura to send a delegation to check on his claim. As even the *Los Angeles Times* noted, “[T]here remains considerable ambiguity about how much of the force resisting the Americans is Al Qaeda members and how much of it is simply local Afghans.”

The US has tacitly admitted that Rahman has local support by the manner in which Operation Anaconda has been organised. Unlike the previous offensive in the Tora Bora areas, the offensive has been led by US troops backed by special operations troops from France, Germany, Australia, Canada and Norway, with Afghan militia playing a largely secondary role.

In the weeks preceding the operation, the US hired around 500 Afghan soldiers from outside the area and trained them in neighbouring Logar province. Paid \$200 a month to fight under US direction, these unemployed Afghan youth received rudimentary instruction in basic military tactics and the use of a single weapon. After their first exercise, these mercenaries were thrown into battle as cannon fodder in support of US and allied troops. One wounded Afghan, Khial Mohammed, told reporters: “Our command was really bad; the American command was really bad.”

Other Afghan troops were sent from the north—Tajiks and Uzbeks—creating tensions with the local Pashtun population. Most of the local militia commanders, including those recognised by the Kabul administration of Hamid Karzai, were deliberately sidelined. General Ziauddin, the chief military commander in Gardez complained: “The Americans don’t consult with us.” When he moved his troops towards the rear lines to provide reinforcements, he was ordered to withdraw and not to “interfere” in the battle.

Far from being a battle to root out “hardened terrorists” or “Al Qaeda holdouts,” all the signs point to Operation Anaconda being directed primarily at crushing a local Afghan militia leader who has considerable local sympathy. An article in the *Washington Post* noted: “Even if just a minority, though, [Rahman] Mansour’s support in the region remains potent, and some Afghan officials say they believe that residents are secretly helping to resupply Al Qaeda forces around Shahi Kot with food and weapons.”

These and similar comments in other articles point to the real reasons for targeting a huge US military offensive against Rahman. As well as being bound up with plans by the Bush administration to extend its “war on terrorism” to other countries, Operation Anaconda is designed to shore up the Karzai government by sending a message to other local warlords not to challenge its shaky rule. A classified CIA

report leaked to the press in late February warned that Afghanistan could descend into chaos unless steps were taken to restrain competition between rival militias and control ethnic and tribal tensions.

But there are also other concerns about the growing local resentment to US military operations, particularly among the Pashtun tribes in southeastern Afghanistan. Scores of civilians have died and many more have been injured in US bombing and Special Forces attacks. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld finally admitted last month that a raid on two compounds had killed at least 16 men loyal to the Kabul administration. He then dismissed any suggestion that future operations would be more carefully planned by declaring: “I don’t think it is an error” and ruling out any disciplinary action.

An incident reported in the *Washington Post* gives an indication of the growing hostility among Afghans to the US military presence. The newspaper’s reporter described a crude propaganda exercise conducted in Gardez aimed at encouraging people to provide the US military with information about the whereabouts of “Al Qaeda forces”. Patriotic music blared out from a stand while officials handed out leaflets urging residents to look out for “hardline enemies of freedom and independence” and “to join hands together and point out their hiding places”.

The leaflet offered informants a \$4,000 reward—a fortune in war-torn Gardez. But as the *Washington Post* commented: “[P]ushing the play button on a tape deck and handing out leaflets announcing reward money are easier than genuinely changing the culture of an area that has long identified with the Islamic radicals who ran Afghanistan until last fall. Some people took one look at the handouts and tore them up, rejecting the notion of turning in their neighbours.... Residents seemingly hostile to the idea were not willing to say so to an American journalist. They simply scowled and walked away.”

The fear is that, whatever his own motivations, a figure like Rahman could become the focus for the accumulating hostility against the US and the government of Hamid Karzai. The aim of Operation Anaconda is not only to brutally eliminate the threat but to intimidate and terrorise any other political opposition.



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