

Britain agrees to send marines to Afghanistan

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Britain is sending 1,700 Royal Marine Commandos to Afghanistan—its largest combat force overseas since the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The surprise deployment takes the total number of British forces deployed for the Afghanistan war to 6,400.

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon announced that the deployment was in response to a specific US request for aid from the Commandos, who are trained in mountain and arctic warfare.

The decision was particularly unexpected, given that the same day as Hoon's announcement was made, on Monday March 18, the US had said its 17-day "Operation Anaconda," in eastern Afghanistan's mountain ranges was drawing to an end. The US deployed B-52 bombers, helicopters, and about 1,500 soldiers against those they claimed to be Al Qaeda terrorists hidden in mountain caves during the operation, which involved troops from half a dozen countries, including Canadian, German and Australian special forces.

During a major offensive on March 13, US, Canadian and Afghan troops had stormed positions near Gardez, about 150km south of Kabul, searching caves and detonating explosives. The Pentagon later announced that some 16 suspected Al Qaeda members had been killed, and 31 captured in two separate operations on March 17. The US-led force had attacked a small convoy, using aircraft to destroy three vehicles and their occupants. Air Force Brigadier General John Rosa claimed, "numerous weapons, ammunition, rocket-propelled grenades were found" in the vehicles but that a fourth car nearby was discovered to have contained a family and had been allowed to go.

President George W. Bush boasted that large numbers of the fighters had been "wiped out" during the operation. The terrorists "are killers... they are relentless," Bush said, but "so are we, and we will be more relentless than they are." "I feel like we've got a

lot more fighting to do in Afghanistan," he continued.

Such statements are symptomatic of the colonial-style carnage being carried out by the US-led "anti-terrorism" coalition in Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of troops from some of the wealthiest countries in the world, armed to the teeth with the most sophisticated "weapons of mass destruction" known to man, are arrayed against several hundred poorly equipped fighters. In the week leading up to March 11 alone, the US claimed to have killed an estimated 500 suspected Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the eastern Paktia province near Gardez.

There is growing evidence that the US-led slaughter in the mountains is directed at crushing local Afghan militias opposed to the puppet regime of Hamid Karzai installed in Kabul by the West. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted previously (see *Who is the US military slaughtering in eastern Afghanistan?* March 11), a report in the *Los Angeles Times* acknowledged that "[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".

Interviewed in *Time* magazine, Lakhdar Brahimi, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Afghanistan, gave an indication of the type of social and political tensions now developing in the region. Brahimi spoke of the "problem of rivalries between [local] militias" and of clashes between ethnic Pashtuns and Northern Alliance supporters in northern Afghanistan. Banditry was rife, he continued, whilst the "authority of the central government is not firmly established everywhere." Such tensions had been compounded by social tensions, Brahimi said, which were fuelling inter-ethnic conflict.

The request for additional British troops would indicate that, under the guise of tracking down Osama bin Laden, Western forces are to be deployed to ruthlessly suppress and wipe out any manifestations of

discontent. US supreme commander in Afghanistan, General Tommy Franks said military planners had already selected the next target, but would not provide details. Since US forces claim not to know of bin Laden's whereabouts, they could justify intervening across the country.

According to British reports the Marines force, led by 45 Command Group, is to be deployed at Bagram air base, 32 miles north-east of Kabul, and to focus in the north and east of the country, and especially around Gardez. The British operation, codenamed Jacana, will operate as part of a US-led brigade and is intended to last for three months, military sources have said, "with intense military action for about 30 days".

Hoon confirmed this timetable in his statement to parliament, whilst making clear that the British commitment was "open-ended". The exact duration of the Marine's operation would only become clear as events unfolded, Hoon said. "The exit strategy is to feel confident that we have removed the continuing threat from Taliban and Al Qaeda," he went on. "Obviously, there are limits to the amount of time we can keep these kinds of soldiers in these kinds of conditions. It will be necessary, if, for example, we find there are larger numbers than we anticipated, to replace them in these operations."

It is important that MPs were "under no illusions" as to what the commitment meant, Hoon said. "These troops are being deployed to Afghanistan to take part in war-fighting operations. We will be asking them to risk their lives." This was necessary because the "hundreds", "possibly thousands" of Taliban fighters camped out in mountains near Gardez, continued to "pose a threat not only to the people of Afghanistan but also to the people of the UK."

The Blair government's support for the operation met with strident criticism in Britain, from within the official establishment parties and the media. Several pointed out that the death of eight US servicemen during the recent operation proved that, despite its military and numerical supremacy, an American victory was by no means assured.

The *Financial Times* warned of the "clear and present danger" in its March 19 editorial. The increased British commitment showed that "there are no easy victories in the war against terrorism". To avoid "ever more troops" becoming "sucked into the Afghan cockpit", it

was now a priority for the West to "create an Afghan force that is capable of dealing with insurgency threats in the future".

Compounding such problems are the growing tensions within the US-led international coalition. With signs that the US is preparing to wage war against Iraq, many countries—especially in Europe—are increasingly concerned at becoming bogged down in a series of military adventures shaped by American interests.

At the weekend, the *Observer* newspaper reported that Britain's military leaders had urged "extreme caution" on Prime Minister Blair in supporting a US attack on Iraq. Such a venture risked British forces becoming "bogged down in a perilous open-ended commitment," they had said, and the "loss of lives for little political gain".

There is no doubt that the decision to expand operations in Afghanistan is partially shaped by the need to speedily and bloodily end the war there, so as to free US hands to move against Iraq. But British commentators have warned the government that no such quick solution may exist and have criticised its preparedness to immediately sign up to any US proposition.

Alice Mahon, Labour MP for Halifax, described it as "mission creep on a massive scale", whilst former defence minister Peter Kilfoyle said Labour backbenchers were "extremely concerned" about the UK becoming "enmeshed" in military adventures driven by US interests. "The precedent for the situation we find ourselves in is Vietnam, and of course Harold Wilson, under great American pressure, kept us out. The unanswered questions in this are the chain of command, the exit strategy, and intelligence, which has been remarkably poor so far. It is a very murky, messy picture we are putting our troops into," he said.

To date 117 MPs have signed a petition expressing opposition to Britain's participation in a US-led war against Iraq.



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