

Signs of growing opposition:

## US launches large military operation in southern Afghanistan

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31 January 2003

Serious fighting in south-eastern Afghanistan this week has highlighted the existence of continuing armed resistance to the US occupation of the country, which in turn reflects a broader hostility and opposition to the American presence.

Hundreds of US, European and Afghan soldiers have been engaged in the largest operation for months near the town of Spin Boldak on the border with Pakistan. The US military claims to have killed 18 out of an estimated force of 80 armed men during 12 to 14 hours of sporadic fighting on Monday and Tuesday.

US commanders launched the operation based on information obtained during an American Special Forces raid on a compound just north of Spin Boldak. After coming under fire, US and Afghan troops killed one attacker, wounded another and detained a third. Under interrogation, the detained man reportedly divulged that there was a larger concentration of opposition fighters in a cave complex further north in the Adi Ghar mountain range.

When Apache helicopters sent to investigate came under small arms fire, the US military commanders dispatched a force of some 350 American, European and Afghan soldiers. Air strikes accounted for most of the dead. US B-1 bombers and Norwegian F-16s pulverised the caves with high explosives while AC-130 gunships and Apache attack helicopters unleashed a withering barrage of fire against any suspected pockets of resistance.

The remnants of the opposition force apparently escaped, possibly to neighbouring Pakistan. US military spokesman Colonel Roger King indicated on Wednesday that American troops were continuing to search at least 160 caves, previously unknown, in the

area. The soldiers recovered a quantity of 107mm rockets and other weapons, as well as ammunition, fuel, food and other supplies.

While there are conflicting reports as to the allegiance of the fighters, King claimed that the force was aligned with Afghan militia leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his Hezb-e-Islami group. During the 1980s, the CIA patronised Hezb-e-Islami, along with other Mujaheddin militia fighting to oust the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. In fact, Hekmatyar, an ethnic Pashtun, received the lion's share of American arms and funding.

Following the fall of the Moscow-supported administration in 1992, Hezb-e-Islami engaged in a bitter struggle for political supremacy with other militia groups, destroying large sections of Kabul and resulting in thousands of deaths. Hekmatyar briefly held the post of prime minister in 1996, as the feuding militia groups attempted to unite against the Taliban. He fled to Iran after Kabul fell to the Taliban in the same year.

In setting up the post-Taliban regime last year, Washington passed over its former "freedom fighter" Hekmatyar, as well as other prominent Mujaheddin leaders, in favour of more malleable figures like Hamid Karzai. Last May, based on unproven claims that he had joined forces with the Taliban, the CIA attempted to assassinate Hekmatyar using an anti-tank missile fired from an unmanned Predator drone. Hekmatyar survived but several of his supporters died in the attack.

Hekmatyar has since called for a jihad or holy war against the US occupation of Afghanistan, denouncing Karzai as a puppet of Washington. Whether the 80 or so fighters at Adi Ghar were allied to Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that a year of US military thuggery,

combined with ongoing poverty and deprivation throughout much of Afghanistan, has antagonised broad layers of the population and produced a rising tide of opposition to the US occupation.

US military spokesmen now routinely report minor, largely ineffectual attacks on US forces or their Afghan allies. As a BBC report noted: “Small bands of fighters—some of whom are not linked to the Taliban or Hekmatyar but are seeking revenge after suffering human and material losses due to US bombing—are operating in the mountainous Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces in southern Afghanistan.”

In some areas, particularly along the border with Pakistan, the Karzai government’s control is limited. A recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* cited the remarks of Najibullah, security chief for Asadabad, a town on the border with Pakistan. He listed a number of neighbouring towns that were effectively outside his control. “Up there, they are against the government, and against us,” he commented. “And the reason they are against us is that we haven’t brought them anything. No hospitals, no doctors, no roads, no security. Nothing has changed, only the faces of the leaders.”

Najibullah explained that he had 1,800 poorly trained and equipped troops under his command. Their nominal wage is \$US1 a month but they have not received any money for months. “We can’t trust our own men. Somebody could offer them thousands of rupees, and I can only offer them 10. It’s possible for even 300 men to take everything from us, not just the city but the province,” he said.

General Hilmi Akin Zorlu, the Turkish commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, has expressed fears that a US invasion of Iraq will intensify opposition to the foreign presence in Afghanistan. “If there is a war in Iraq, there might be many sympathisers throughout Afghanistan. It may cause an increase in terrorist actions against foreigners including ISAF, UN, coalition forces and all civilian businessmen coming to Afghanistan,” he told the *Washington Post* in early January.

Zorlu said the 4,300 troops under his command were constantly interrupting potential attacks and confiscating heavy weapons ammunition found hidden around the capital. He listed a string of incidents, including a grenade attack on American soldiers, the

discovery of an explosives store in a girls school and an attack on foreigners waiting outside an ISAF compound.

These sentiments were echoed by a government official, Engineer Amin, in the border town of Ungorada. “These days, Al Qaeda is very active and they are crossing over here a lot... Our information is that when America starts the attack on Iraq, they will make an attack here. They will attack in big numbers, on the American base and against anyone who works with the Americans,” he told the *New York Times*.

Like others, Amin brands all opposition as “Al Qaeda” and “Taliban”. Clearly, however, there are concerns that a US invasion of Iraq has the potential to spark wider opposition inside Afghanistan. The latest US military operation near Spin Boldak has the character of a preemptive strike aimed at cracking down on anti-government militia groups before a war is launched against Baghdad. At the same time, Washington is insisting that Pakistan take tougher measures along the border with Afghanistan and allow US forces to engage in “hot pursuit” of enemy forces fleeing into Pakistan.

All of this makes a mockery of Washington’s claim, repeated in President Bush’s State of the Union address, to have brought peace, democracy and well being to Afghan people. “In Afghanistan,” Bush declared, “we helped liberate an oppressed people, and we will continue helping them secure their country, rebuild their society and educate all their children.”

What the US has brought over the last year is the death of thousands of innocent Afghans, the trampling of basic democratic rights, the installation of a puppet regime in Kabul and a pittance in aid that scarcely begins to address the social needs of one of the most impoverished countries in the world. Now the Bush administration is preparing to wage war against Iraq, with potentially even more devastating consequences for the Iraqi people, and which will, as in Afghanistan, certainly provoke fierce opposition.



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