

US launches military offensive to crush growing Afghan opposition

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In reply to a sharply rising level of guerrilla attacks, US and Afghan forces launched large-scale operations on Monday against armed opposition militia in the south east of Afghanistan. The attacks and the repressive response underscore the growing hostility and resistance to the US-led military occupation of the country and its client regime in Kabul.

US Special Forces soldiers and hundreds of Afghan troops, backed by massive US air support, have been sweeping mountainous areas of Zabul province where between 600 and 1,000 Taliban fighters were said to be entrenched. The operation began on Monday with the bombardment of an alleged Taliban camp using A-10 gunships, F-16s and AV-8B Harrier attack jets, which killed at least 14 people according to a US military spokesman.

Codenamed "Operation Warrior Sweep", the offensive has continued throughout the week. Air attacks have been followed by ground operations involving house-to-house searches of villages in the Dai Chupan district. Local police chief Juman Khan announced on Monday that 40 people had been detained, but cautioned that he had no idea how many of those were innocent civilians.

Provincial intelligence chief Khalil Hotak announced on Wednesday that US and Afghan forces had retaken control of the key Moray Pass after heavy fighting. He claimed that at least a dozen Taliban had been killed, bringing the total to 70. At least three Afghan soldiers have lost their lives. More fierce fighting took place yesterday, with an Afghan colonel claiming that a further 40 Taliban had been killed.

In another operation in neighbouring Paktika province, about 600 US and Afghan troops, backed by helicopter gunships, were engaged in extensive house-to-house searches in the Urgun district. According to Afghan officials, by Monday at least 80 people had been detained in the raids.

There is no independent confirmation of claims by the US and Afghan military of who exactly is being killed and detained. But if the Taliban, allied militia or other opposition groups have managed to gather in their hundreds, entrench themselves in mountain strongholds and build training camps, it is a sign of mounting opposition, particularly among the country's majority Pashtuns in the south and east of Afghanistan.

While media attention has been focused on Iraq, Afghanistan is also becoming a quagmire for the US military. After nearly two years of sustained operations, a US-led force of some 12,500 largely American troops, working with Afghan soldiers and allied militia, has failed to pacify the country. Far from destroying "Al Qaeda and Taliban remnants," the US military operations, each of which have reaped a toll of civilian deaths and arbitrary detentions, have only engendered greater resistance.

Small-scale attacks on Afghan troops, US-bases and other government targets have regularly taken place. But in recent weeks, these have escalated in both scope and intensity. The US-led operations in Paktika and Zabul are in reprisal for a series of ambushes and attacks in these provinces over the past fortnight, including:

- * Two large attacks on police stations in Paktika province took place on August 17. In the first, more than 200 militia fighters overran a police post in Barmal district, killing eight police officers including the district police chief. Later in the day, another large force numbering several hundred set fire to a police station in the border village of Tarway and kidnapped four officers.

- * The following day, anti-government fighters attacked and killed Abdul Khaliq, the police chief of Logar province and several other senior police officers. The group was returning from a family funeral when their vehicles came under rocket attack.

- * Last Friday, a three-hour battle between government soldiers and rebels erupted in neighbouring Uruzgan

province. Four soldiers and two opposition militiamen died in the bitter fighting. Afghan officials claimed the militia group was based in the Dai Chupan district of Zabul province. The next day, at least five government soldiers died in an ambush in the Dai Chupan area.

US and Afghan officials regularly blame Pakistan for the attacks, claiming that it has not done enough to prevent militia groups crossing into Afghanistan. But the real source of the resistance lies in the discontent and opposition that has been bred inside Afghanistan by the activities of the US military and its allies.

Since the ousting of the Taliban in late 2001, the vast majority of Afghans have seen no improvement either in their living standards or respect for their basic democratic rights. Outside the capital, the country has been carved up between local warlords and militia leaders, who operate with the sanction of Kabul and the US military. These petty despots are often engaged in smuggling, drug running and extortion and do not hesitate to use the most brutal methods to maintain their rule.

In a bid to bolster its position in Afghanistan, the Bush administration is poised to announce a doubling of reconstruction aid—from the present \$900 million to around \$1.8 billion. While the package is yet to be announced, Washington’s aid coordinator for Afghanistan, William Taylor told to the media: “What we’re trying to do is to focus attention, people, resources on Afghanistan, and we’re looking for ways to do that.”

Even if the aid is increased, it will be a pittance compared to what is required to provide basic services. Many Afghans still lack access to electricity, water, transport, health care, education and, in some cases, adequate food supplies. A recent Rand Corporation report comparing so-called peacekeeping operations found that per capita financial assistance to Afghanistan had been just \$54 in the first two years as compared to \$1,390 in Bosnia and \$814 in Kosovo over a comparable period.

Washington’s priorities have nothing to do with ending the widespread poverty in Afghanistan. About half of the new US aid is to go towards training more police officers and doubling the size of the national army from 5,000 to 10,000 soldiers. Much of the rest is to go toward high-profile projects such as roads and power plants, which are aimed at establishing the infrastructure for foreign investment.

The Bush administration plans to bolster the US presence by assigning an additional 70 staff to its embassy staff in Kabul and sending four more military reconstruction teams to key provincial towns. The

American and British military already have four teams in place, setting up local administration, police and court systems and carrying out small-scale construction projects in a bid to win local support.

A number of the new US officials in Kabul are to be assigned to government departments. But there are already concerns that these “advisers” and “hearts and minds” teams will simply provoke further opposition, recalling similar ultimately futile efforts by Soviet authorities during their military occupation in the 1980s. A *New York Times* report cautiously noted that American officials were pledging that the new advisers would not resemble the “shadow ministers” that Moscow installed in Kabul.

The small increase in financial assistance is a crude attempt to shore up, at least temporarily, Washington’s puppet in Kabul—President Hamid Karzai. Currently Karzai’s writ does not extend beyond the capital where he is defended by US bodyguards and the 5,000-strong International Security Assistance Force, which was recently transferred from UN to NATO command. Any undermining of Karzai, who is due to face national elections next year, would be a political blow to Washington.

The efforts to shore up the US position in Afghanistan are also being undertaken with another election in mind. The last thing that Bush’s political advisers want is for a worsening situation in Afghanistan, alongside that in Iraq, to become a major issue in the lead-up to next year’s presidential poll.



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