

Afghanistan: escalating opposition to the US occupation

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A series of recent incidents in Afghanistan have highlighted the precarious position of the US military in the country. While the level of armed attacks is not the same as in Iraq, there is nevertheless growing resistance, to the military presence of the US and its allies in Afghanistan.

Last Sunday five US soldiers died and another eight were injured when their helicopter crashed near Bagram air base north of the capital of Kabul. The Pentagon is still investigating the crash, saying that engine failure may have caused the accident. Local villagers told the media that they heard a loud bang and saw the helicopter's tail fall off before the aircraft hit the ground and burst into flames.

The soldiers were taking part in Operation Mountain Resolve—an extended offensive launched on November 7 in the remote mountainous region in Nuristan and Kunar provinces near the border with Pakistan. Backed by helicopter gunships and warplanes, US troops are attempting to hunt down and kill scattered groups of fighters said to be aligned with the former Taliban regime, Al Qaeda and former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

On the day of the helicopter crash, two US soldiers were injured, one with a severed leg, when their Humvee was struck by a mine or a remote-controlled explosive device. The ambush took place near the town of Shkin, the site of a remote American military base close to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. US patrols in the area regularly come under attack. According to the Pentagon, nine of the 10 US combat deaths in Afghanistan this year have taken place near Shkin. Five of them died in the past eight weeks, along with four Afghan soldiers.

A third incident took place on the same day in Kabul. An explosion outside the up market Intercontinental

Hotel shattered windows and damaged a wall but caused no casualties. The blast was significant as attacks in the capital, which is patrolled by 5,500 troops from International Security Assistance Force, are relatively rare. According to media reports, a Taliban spokesman claimed responsibility for the explosion and warned that there would be more attacks on foreigners in Afghanistan.

Just a week before, 29-year-old French refugee worker was killed when two gunmen on a motorbike opened fire on her UN vehicle in the centre of the provincial capital of Ghazni. The slaying followed a series of attacks on UN agencies, including a car bombing outside the main UN compound in the southern city of Kandahar. UN officials in Kabul announced on November 18 that they were suspending assistance to refugees returning from Pakistan as well as withdrawing all foreign aid workers from the southeast of the country.

The spate of attacks is a further sign that opposition to the presence of the US and its allies is growing, particularly among the Pashtun majority in the south and east of the country where the Taliban was based. An article in the UK-based *Observer* on November 16 noted: "The Taliban are expanding fast. The deputy governor of Zabul admits most of his province is now controlled by the militia. Most of Oruzgan province and around half of Kandahar province is now beyond government authority. Even in supposedly loyal areas there are many loyal to [Taliban leader] Mullah Omar."

A recent article on the *Asia Times* website pointed out that the Taliban are actively recruiting among Afghan refugees and other youth attending Islamic religious schools or madrassas in areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. Anti-US hostility has risen sharply, particularly after the invasion of Iraq, among a

population that has close ethnic and tribal links to the neighbouring Pashtun areas of Afghanistan. The Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, an alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, won effective control of Pakistan's two border provinces—Baluchistan and Northwest Province—at the last elections.

Despite the demands of Washington and Kabul, the Pakistani military has had little success in sealing the country's long and rugged border with Afghanistan. Moreover, as the *Asia Times* article pointed out, the Taliban and other anti-US groups are no longer reliant on hit-and-run ambushes across the border. "This is how the Taliban guerrillas initially operated, by taking sanctuary in Pakistan for forays into Afghanistan, as the border is impossible to monitor. But as they have been more successful, they have been able to establish more permanent bases within the country, and tend now to use Pakistan only for emergencies—or to round up new recruits."

The attacks by opposition militia are also becoming bolder and more organised. On November 11, opposition gunmen launched an attack on a convoy of five armoured vehicles as they stopped at a roadblock south of Kandahar's airport, after returning from Spin Boldak near the Pakistan border. One Romanian soldier was killed and another died later of his wounds. Romania has supplied 450 troops to bolster the 8,500 US soldiers currently engaged in Afghanistan.

Attacks by militia groups are just one symptom of the widespread hostility to the US military presence and its puppet regime in Kabul. The reasons are not hard to find. Any expectations that the US intervention would bring peace and prosperity after 20 years of war have long been dashed. Two years after the US military and its allies toppled the Taliban regime, the country continues to be mired in poverty and economic backwardness. Outside Kabul, rival warlords, tribal chiefs and militia commanders have carved out their own petty empires, imposing their own writ and ruthlessly stamping out any opposition.

Even in Kabul there is a glaring divide between the majority of the population and a small minority that have prospered after the ousting of the Taliban. A recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* noted that the wages of teachers were just \$35 to \$40 a month. "Sadly, only a few teachers have received this paltry sum in over a year. In places like Kabul, where

apartment rents have soared to more than \$1,800 per month, such salaries don't even permit purchase of basic food supplies."

Last Sunday soldiers opened fire on ex-army officers and personnel protesting outside the Defence Ministry to demand three months unpaid wages. One man was killed and at least three others injured in the clash. More than 50,000 people, including officers, will lose their jobs as a result of the restructuring of the military. Some 20,000 have already been dismissed this year.

This deepening social crisis, which a pittance in international aid has done nothing to alleviate, is fuelling the discontent and opposition to the US-backed Karzai regime. The conditions bear a strong resemblance to the social breakdown and political anarchy in Afghanistan in the early 1990s that led to the rise of the Taliban, backed by Pakistan and with the tacit support of Washington. It is not surprising that the Taliban and other opposition militia are becoming emboldened.



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