

Rising death toll undermines the White House's rosy picture of Afghanistan

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A series of incidents in Afghanistan over the past week has highlighted the continuing resistance to the US-led occupation of the country and the mounting number of casualties. Far from being the "success story" that the Bush administration would like to claim, the country remains wracked by ongoing civil war, immense social problems and a lack of basic democratic rights.

Two soldiers from the 5,500-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were killed in Kabul in separate attacks this week. On Tuesday, a Canadian soldier, Corporal Jamie Murphy, died and three others were injured when a suicide bomber jumped in front of their vehicle. The following day a British soldier, Private Jonathan Kitulagoda, was killed and four others wounded, two seriously, when a suicide bomber in a taxi drew alongside their jeep and detonated explosives. About 10 civilians, including a French aid worker, were also wounded in the attacks.

A Taliban spokesman claimed responsibility for both blasts and declared that it was "just the beginning." "More such attacks will take place. Hundreds of our men are ready to carry out such attacks," he said. Such attacks while relatively frequent in Iraq have been rare in Afghanistan. One of the few instances occurred six months ago, when four German ISAF soldiers were killed near the spot where the British troops died.

On Thursday, seven US soldiers died when an ammunition dump exploded in the southern town of Ghazni. Another soldier is missing and three more were wounded. The cause of the explosion remains unclear. According to initial reports, the troops were trying to move the weapons when the cache detonated. The US military has instigated an inquiry to determine whether the dump had been booby-trapped or not.

The death toll for US troops involved in the occupation of Afghanistan, which reached 100 earlier in the month, is now 107. Only 16 soldiers were killed in the initial ousting of the Taliban regime in late 2001—10 of those died in a helicopter crash in the Philippines, which was considered part of the Pentagon's Operation Enduring Freedom. Separate from the

ISAF, the US military provides 9,000 of the 11,000 troops that are under its command and operate throughout Afghanistan suppressing opposition.

The casualty rate among Afghan troops supporting the US and among civilians is far higher. Overall more than 140 people have been killed or injured just this month. At least 15 people were killed and another 58 injured, many of them schoolchildren, in a bomb attack near a military base in the southern city of Kandahar in early January.

In other cases, indiscriminate attacks by the US military have been responsible. Afghan officials recently alleged that 11 civilians, including three women and four children, were killed in a raid by a US attack helicopter on the village of Saghatho in southern Afghanistan on the night of January 18. Local district chief Abdul Rahman explained that the villagers had fled fearing arrest following a raid by US ground forces. They were attacked from the air as they reached a river. "They were simple villagers. They were not Taliban," he declared angrily. The US military has dismissed the accusations, saying the men were armed.

Aid agencies have been warning for some time that the deteriorating security situation is undermining their work in Afghanistan. A number of aid workers have been killed or injured in attacks by opposition forces. The UN has decided that over half of the country's provinces are too dangerous for its workers. Plans to hold presidential and parliamentary elections in June are also in doubt. US State Department coordinator for Afghanistan William Taylor hinted this week for the first time that there were difficulties in meeting the deadline.

UN spokesman Farham Haq, however, was far more emphatic, declaring: "UN officials don't think a June deadline is realistic." A review published by the British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG) this week found that just over half a million voters had been registered since the process began in late December. In some areas, voter registration was as low as 11 percent. "It is clear that the UN will have great difficulty meeting its target of total registration by June 2004," the report concluded.

But as veteran journalist Ahmed Rashid noted in a lengthy article entitled “The Mess in Afghanistan” in the latest issue of the *New York Review of Books*, the Bush administration is cynically pressing ahead with the poll, along with other measures, in order to bolster its image prior to the American elections. Reporting a conversation with a senior US official in Kabul last year, Rashid wrote:

“With no turning point in Iraq in sight, he said, no accomplishment that might help the President’s approval rating in an election year, Bush’s advisers decided that Afghanistan needed to be turned into a success story. If Osama bin Laden could not be caught, at least there should be an Afghan presidential election that could be publicised as a major step forward in the war against terrorism. For that to happen, more money was needed, reconstruction had to be accelerated, and the creation of new Afghan security forces speeded up.”

Last year the White House sought and obtained an additional \$1.2 billion in aid for Afghanistan—more than doubling the figure it had pledged earlier. President Bush is expected shortly to ask for an extra \$1 billion in his 2005 budget request. After confining the ISAF largely to Kabul for more than two years, Washington is now pressing its European allies to commit more troops to Afghanistan and to expand their activities.

It is no accident that Afghanistan featured prominently in Bush’s recent State of the Union speech. After boasting about the upcoming elections, the flourishing business activity and improving health care and education, he declared: “With the help from the new Afghan army, our coalition is leading aggressive raids against the surviving members of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The men and women of Afghanistan are building a nation that is free and proud and fighting terror—and America is honoured to be their friend.”

It is also no coincidence that, as well as insisting that the Afghan poll proceed on time, Washington is also preparing a new military offensive aimed at capturing Osama bin Laden. According to the *Chicago Tribune* this week, the Pentagon has issued orders to prepare equipment and supplies for “a spring offensive”. Citing a senior defence official, Associated Press reported that Pentagon officials had determined a couple of months ago that it was important to capture bin Laden, “more for the symbolism than for his military value.”

All stops, it appears, are being pulled out in Afghanistan to reelect Bush. The reality, however, is far different and underscores the fact that Bush’s fatuous statements have nothing to do with the well-being of the Afghan people.

The “new Afghan army” is more show than substance. According to the BAAG review cited above, the Afghan

Defence Ministry recently announced that about 3,000 soldiers from the Afghan National Army (ANA) being trained by US and European instructors have deserted after completing training. Armed Afghan militia who have been fighting alongside US forces have suffered far higher casualty rates—around 10 percent have been killed—compared to coalition troops. The ANA soldiers clearly fear they will be used as expendable cannon fodder as well as being targeted by the armed anti-government forces.

Outside Kabul, most of the country is under the control of a patchwork of rival warlords, tribal chiefs and militia commanders who coexist with US military forces and with the US-backed puppet regime headed by President Hamid Karzai. Many are notorious for the brutal and anti-democratic methods used to rule their fiefdoms. Attempts by the US military to strengthen Kabul’s writ by sending small Provincial Reconstruction Teams of between 60 and 100 personnel to key regional centres have quickly proven inadequate.

Much of the foreign aid that was pledged to Afghanistan has been slow in coming. American academic Barnett Rubin estimated that only \$110 million worth of reconstruction projects had been completed in the country as of November 2003, out of a total UN aid disbursement of \$2.9 billion from December 2001. Governor Pashtun of Kandahar told journalist Ahmed Rashid: “We are trapped in a vicious cycle. If there is no money for reconstruction there can be no peace, and without peace and a stable law-and-order situation, there can be no reconstruction.”

Washington’s disinterest in the country’s deep-seating social problems, along with the impact of US military operations, is continuing to fuel opposition. At present, this finds its most obvious expression in support for right-wing Islamist forces and ongoing armed attacks on the US military and its allies. For all of the Bush administration’s efforts to paint a rosy picture in Afghanistan, nothing can hide the fact that the US is engaged in the neo-colonial occupation of the country in pursuit of its own strategic and economic aims.



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