Increasing attacks on US and allies in Afghanistan

Peter Symonds
23 June 2005

Despite a lack of media coverage, there are growing signs that armed resistance to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan is on the rise.

Over the past three months, a surge of fighting, particularly in the south and east of the country, has claimed the lives of more than 30 Afghan police and soldiers, about 260 suspected rebels and at least 100 civilians. Since March, 29 US soldiers have been killed—about 20 percent of the US death toll in Afghanistan since late 2001.

US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, who is to take over as top US diplomat in Iraq this week, played down the continuing conflict in his farewell speech. Afghanistan, he declared, had taken enormous strides against terrorism, extremism and warlordism. “Now is the time for friendship and reconciliation. Don’t allow fighting between the brothers of Afghanistan once again,” he said.

Even as Khalilzad was preparing to depart, however, the National Security Directorate in Kabul announced that it had thwarted an attempt to assassinate the ambassador. Afghan authorities paraded three Pakistani nationals on local TV, saying they had been caught with rockets and assault rifles in Laghman Province. According to security officials, the three were arrested on Sunday near a ceremony attended by Khalilzad and admitted they intended to kill him.

The incident inflamed tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Khalilzad has on several occasions accused Pakistan of failing to do enough to prevent insurgents from infiltrating across the border into Afghanistan—claims that were repeated after Sunday’s incident. Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed reacted angrily, describing hints that Islamabad was involved in the assassination plot as “a baseless allegation”. The friction highlights the frustration of Afghan and US officials over the failure of the US-led military to stamp out armed resistance.

Far from “enormous strides” being taken, Washington’s puppet—President Hamid Karzai—confronts a determined opposition that is being fuelled by the continued foreign military presence, heavy-handed repression and the failure to address pressing social and economic needs. Despite the presence of around 18,000 US and allied troops backed by helicopter gunships and warplanes, groups of armed rebels continue to carry out many hit-and-run attacks on government security forces, officials and supporters.

One of the largest recent clashes occurred late last week in the district of Mian Nishin in the southern Kandahar province. Rebels attacked a police convoy, then overran the district capital, also called Mian Nishin, capturing 31 police and taking over the main government building. A Taliban spokesman announced on Sunday that the police had been put on trial and eight, including the police chief, had been executed. The remaining 23 officers were released after pledging not to fight against the Taliban.

Some 400 Afghan police backed by US gunships mounted a major operation to retake the town on Tuesday. Deputy provincial police chief Salim Khan told Reuters on Tuesday that the police drove the rebels to an area north of the town and killed 11 in fighting at the village of Murghai. He said another 21 guerrillas had been killed in US air strikes.

Fighting continued into Wednesday as US soldiers and Afghan police pursued fleeing rebels and blasted their positions with AC-130 gunships, Apache helicopters and A-10 warplanes. Salim Khan told the media yesterday: “This is the heaviest bombing and fighting I have seen since the fall of the Taliban.” He claimed that at least 64 Taliban had been killed and another 30 captured. Twelve Afghan soldiers and police died in the operation and five US soldiers were wounded.

Other attacks over the past week include:

* Sunday June 19: Intense fighting also took place in Helmand province. The US military claimed to have killed “15 to 20 enemies” in air strikes on fighters who had attacked a US coalition ground patrol in a remote mountainous area. “When these criminals engage coalition forces, they do so at considerable risk. We are not going to let up on them. There is not going to be a safe haven in Afghanistan,” US spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jerry O’Hara declared.

On the same day, three rockets were fired into the city of Kandahar. The target appears to have been the former home of Taliban leader Mullah Omar, which now houses US Special Forces. In a separate incident, police in Zabul province claimed to have killed seven rebels late Sunday night and early Monday morning after they attacked a police checkpoint on the Kabul-Kandahar highway, killing one officer.

© World Socialist Web Site

* Saturday June 18: A two-hour gun battle raged in the Daychopan district of Zabul province after insurgents attacked a government office. According to a provincial spokesman, four rebels were killed after US helicopter gunships were sent to support Afghan troops. On Saturday night, armed gunmen shot dead a judge, an intelligence official and a provincial education department employee in Helmand province.

* Friday June 17: A roadside bomb in Helmand province killed a soldier in a passing vehicle. Elsewhere, fighting between Afghan troops and insurgents in Shah Wali Kot district of Kandahar province left two rebels dead.

* Tuesday June 14: Some 90 fighters attacked a joint Afghan-US coalition patrol on the border between Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces. According to a government official, seven rebels were shot dead. In a second attack in Kandahar province, gunmen shot dead a tribal elder, whose family had openly backed President Karzai.

* Monday June 13: At least four US soldiers were killed when a bomb blast hit a military convoy outside the city of Kandahar. Initial reports indicated that five US troops had been killed in a suicide bomb attack but were later discounted by US spokesmen. One of the US troops was seriously injured and had to be evacuated. The Kandahar attack came just days after an American soldier was killed and three others injured when their patrol was ambushed in Paktika province.

Until recently, suicide bombings have been relatively rare in Afghanistan. The newly appointed Kabul police chief, General Muhammad Akram Khakrezwal, was killed along with at least 19 others in what was thought to have been a suicide bomb attack in a mosque in Kandahar on June 1. The blast occurred during mourning for a well-known anti-Taliban cleric Maulavi Abdullah Fayaz, who had been assassinated by gunmen just days before. At least 50 people were injured in the bombing.

US and Afghan officials have pointed to the end of winter and preparations underway to hold parliamentary elections in September to explain the upsurge of attacks. “It looks like there has been a regrouping of Al Qaeda and they may have changed their tactics not only to concentrate on Iraq, but also on Afghanistan,” the country’s defence minister Rahim Wardak told the media on Saturday. “We do believe that we will have three months of very tough times. The enemies of this nation will do everything they can do to disrupt the election.”

Wardak offered no evidence to support his assertions. Karzai and his ministers have reasons for linking the attacks to the election process. Despite its limited constitutional powers, an elected parliament would complicate the operations of the Kabul administration, which currently has no such restraint. The parliamentary elections, which were initially scheduled for June 2004, have been postponed repeatedly for “security reasons”.

Moreover, it is not simply Al Qaeda or the Taliban that are carrying out attacks on US and government targets. In recent comments in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Interior Ministry spokesman Latfullah Mashal declared: “Most people don’t realise how many layers of terrorists and criminals the government of Afghanistan is trying to fight. What goes out in the press is mostly about Al Qaeda and the Taliban, but there is much more.”

Mashal blamed 70 percent of clashes on the Taliban, Al Qaeda and fighters associated with former Afghanistan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. As well as attacks directed against the US-led occupation, there is ongoing violence in many areas of the country—the product of rivalries, criminal activity and personal feuds involving local warlords, military commanders and tribal leaders, many of whom the US supported as the means for ousting the Taliban regime.

Moreover, the US military and its allies routinely dismiss the casualties caused by their operations as “enemy”, “Taliban” or “Al Qaeda”. But in a country where many people are armed, there is no means of distinguishing between “enemy” and ordinary tribesmen. Searches of villages and arbitrary arrests, as well as civilian deaths and injuries, are significant sources of anger and frustration among ordinary Afghans.

Feeding popular discontent and resentment is the country’s economic and social catastrophe. Outside of Kabul, unemployment and poverty are rampant. The main economic activity is the cultivation of opium poppies—Afghanistan currently accounts for most of the world’s supply of heroin. The World Food Program estimates that at least 6.5 million of the country’s population of 21-26 million are dependent on food aid for survival.

Afghanistan’s social indices remain among the worst in the world. Life expectancy is just 44.5 years and one fifth of children die before reaching the age of five. Around 72,000 new cases of tuberculosis are reported every year. Epidemics are frequent, including measles, malaria, meningitis and haemorrhagic fever. The World Health Organisation recently announced that an unknown water-borne disease, possibly cholera, had broken out in Kabul with more than 3,000 cases reported.

It is little wonder that, more than three years after the US-led intervention, Afghans blame Washington for creating this disastrous state of affairs and some are prepared to take up arms against the occupation.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site