

Helicopter downing highlights upsurge in Afghan armed resistance

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The downing of a US Chinook helicopter on June 28 has brought into sharp focus the steadily deteriorating position of the US-led military forces in Afghanistan. As the fourth anniversary of the invasion approaches, resistance is reaching a scale that will require the deployment of thousands more American and NATO troops in order to maintain US control over the country.

The Chinook was shot down in mountainous countryside in the south-eastern province of Konar. A six-to-eight man US special forces team carrying out a reconnaissance operation to locate guerilla camps called for assistance after being discovered and coming under attack. As a fleet of Chinooks ferried in reinforcements, one was hit by the Afghan fighters.

Sixteen US personnel were killed in the crash—eight Navy SEAL troops and eight Chinook crewmen—in the largest single loss of life suffered by the American military in Afghanistan. An unmanned Predator drone aircraft is also believed to have been brought down. The casualties bring the death toll in Afghanistan this year to 54—two more than the US military suffered in all of 2004.

The death toll in Konar appears likely to climb. After a six-day operation involving hundreds of American and Afghan troops, only one member of the special forces team had been found alive as of yesterday. The others have been listed as “missing in action”.

A Taliban spokesman, Abdul Latif Hakimi, claimed over the weekend that its fighters had killed seven US “spies” before bringing down the Chinook. The BBC reported that the US-led forces encountered “fierce militant resistance” as they recovered the bodies from the crash site and searched for the missing soldiers.

On Sunday, as many as 25 people were killed in US air strikes against the village of Chichil, where the insurgents are alleged to have been based.

Over the past three months, the US military has been forced to launch a series of offensives in the south and south-east of the country, particularly in the border region with Pakistan, in order to retake areas that have fallen under Taliban control. As well as the operation in Konar, an assault has been underway for several weeks in the Khakeran valley area of Kandahar, where Taliban fighters seized the police station in March.

Outside of Kabul, the Karzai government exerts next to no authority. The resurgence of the Taliban in the south and east last month forced the UN to indefinitely suspend its de-mining project in the region. The Pakistani government, under US pressure, has deployed as many as 70,000 troops along its border, but has failed to prevent insurgent groups based among the area’s ethnic Pashtun tribes moving freely back and forward between the two countries.

In an indication of the scale of the anti-occupation insurgency, the US military claims to have killed over 470 guerillas since March. Assessing the growth of resistance, Sayed Asadullah Hashimi, an academic at Kabul University, told the *New York Times*: “Outside Kabul, two-thirds of the people think that the Americans came only to invade and occupy Afghanistan, and that is why day-by-day tension is growing. The mood is worsening.”

A former Pakistani general told Agence France Presse: “The Taliban are reconstituting themselves. It is a serious situation. Their activities are very coordinated and they are very mobile.”

The US military insists that the Chinook was hit by a “lucky shot” from a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launcher. The success of the Afghan fighters in hitting helicopters, however, has invoked inevitable memories of the war waged by the *mujahedeen* against the Soviet army in the 1980s. In the final years of conflict, over

150 Soviet aircraft and helicopters were shot down by guerillas using shoulder-fired Stinger surface-to-air missiles supplied by the CIA. Last week, two other Chinooks were hit by ground fire in Kandahar province, forcing one to make an emergency landing.

Concerns are growing in Washington. With 140,000 troops tied down in Iraq, the US military does not have the ability to substantially reinforce the 18,000 troops it has deployed in Afghanistan. At the same time, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) warned in a report to Congress, issued on June 30, that the occupation forces had failed to construct a viable local Afghani military and state apparatus.

Of the 43,000 Afghan army troops that the American military claimed it would train, just 18,300 have been recruited. The 35,000 police working for the new government have proven incapable of asserting control in large parts of the country. The GAO report noted: “Trainees often return to police stations where militia leaders are the principal authority; most infrastructure needs repair and the police do not have sufficient equipment—from weapons to vehicles.”

The report also criticised the inability of the US-led forces to control opium production in Afghanistan. Quoting the US State department, the GAO declared that the revenues from the drug trade “breed corruption at virtually all levels of the Afghan government while providing revenues to Taliban remnants, drug lords and other terrorist groups”. US forces, the report noted, had also failed to disarm the various militias, leaving large quantities of weapons available for use by resistance groups.

In June, security concerns led to the parliamentary elections being delayed until September. Whether they go ahead is now in doubt unless large numbers of Western troops can be deployed. NATO announced in mid-June that it would send an additional 3,000 personnel to Afghanistan to provide security during the poll. Countries sending more troops include Spain, Britain, Romania and the Netherlands. The Australian government is also believed to be under pressure from Washington to deploy a sizeable force.

The rising level of armed resistance to the US military in Afghanistan compounds the political problems confronting the Bush administration. Even as it faces deepening unpopularity as a result of the disastrous situation in Iraq, the White House has to deal

with another quagmire in Afghanistan.



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