

US pushes military build-up in Afghanistan as armed resistance escalates

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Under strong pressure from Washington, a number of countries have been building up troop numbers to bolster the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. While nominally to provide security for parliamentary elections due to take place on September 18, the military build-up is taking place amid a sharp escalation of armed resistance to the US presence that has led to a rising toll of casualties.

A US soldier was killed and four others injured when a roadside bomb struck their armoured vehicle in Khayr Kot district of Paktika province on Friday. The previous weekend another four American troops died in Zabul province when a large remote-controlled bomb exploded under a wooden bridge as their convoy was crossing. More than 65 US soldiers have been killed so far this year, most in combat—by far the worst toll since the US-led intervention began in October 2001.

US troops are conducting extensive operations aimed at hunting down insurgents and intimidating the local population prior to the poll. After four years of attacks and aerial bombardment, searches and arbitrary arrests, much of the Pashtun majority in the south and east of the country is deeply hostile to the occupation and the US puppet regime headed by President Hamid Karzai in Kabul.

The US military last week completed a major offensive in eastern Kunar province near the Pakistani border and announced that more than 40 “enemy” had been killed. The sweep was clearly a reprisal for the killing of three US special forces troops in an ambush in the same area in June. Another 16 US military personnel sent to rescue the troops died when their helicopter was shot down.

According to Associated Press, the US and Afghan officials claim to have killed more than 750 insurgents over the last six months. Nearly 200 civilians and about 100 Afghan security forces have also died. Many of the so-called enemy deaths may well have been civilian casualties as US officials routinely dismiss statements by villagers who have been the victims of US attacks.

On August 12, for instance, the *New York Times* reported the results of a raid by a US warplane on the remote village

of Mara Kale in southern Afghanistan. According to survivors in a Kandahar hospital, four people died in the attack. Muhammad Yar told the newspaper that his mother had been killed and his house destroyed in the raid. US military spokesman Colonel James Yonts responded by declaring that he doubted that there were any civilian casualties as the area was uninhabited.

Attacks on US and allied forces in Afghanistan are not on the scale of Iraq and receive scant coverage in the US and international media. Nevertheless, nearly four years after the US toppled the Taliban regime, there are large areas of the country outside the control of US-led military forces and the armed opposition is becoming more organised. Jean Arnault, UN special envoy to Afghanistan, recently told the UN Security Council that an end to violence in the country “remains a distant goal”.

In response to the latest wave of attacks, the Pentagon rushed in an airborne infantry battalion of about 700 troops from Fort Bragg. There are now more than 21,000 troops, including 3,100 soldiers from 19 other nations, under direct US command in Afghanistan. Another 9,300 troops under NATO command form the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) based mainly in Kabul.

Both forces are due to expand significantly. Britain announced in June that it was preparing to scale down the number of troops in Iraq in order to play an expanded role in Afghanistan. Any new contingent will initially join US forces in the south and east of the country prior to the British military assuming the ISAF leadership in May. The Australian government has committed nearly 200 special forces soldiers who are due to arrive in Afghanistan shortly to take part in US-led operations.

Earlier this month, NATO has announced that the ISAF would be bolstered by 2,000 more troops and would assume greater operational responsibilities. The bulk of the new troops are to be provided the Netherlands, Romania, Italy, Austria and the US. Initially confined to the capital, the ISAF expanded its operations into the north and more recently into the west of the country.

For governments that have been compelled to distance themselves from the US occupation of Iraq, committing troops to Afghanistan has been a useful means for mending bridges with the Bush administration and expanding their own international military role. Out of the media spotlight, the German government, which, under the pressure of public opinion, was critical of the US invasion of Iraq, has nearly 2,000 troops in Afghanistan—currently the largest contingent.

The Spanish Socialist Party-led government, which pulled troops out of Iraq in April last year, has about 800 soldiers in Afghanistan. After 17 troops were killed in a fatal air crash earlier this month, the government in Madrid reaffirmed its determination to maintain its force in Afghanistan, despite public opposition and protests calling for their withdrawal.

Fraud of elections

The build-up of NATO troops is taking place under the guise of protecting parliamentary elections and helping with humanitarian projects. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) have been dispatched to major cities in the north and west of the country and are currently being expanded into the south. Canadian troops have established a PRT in Kandahar and others are to operate in Nimroz and Hilmand. The government of Prime Minister John Howard in Canberra has indicated that it may send several hundred Australian troops next year as part of a PRT.

As is the case in Iraq, the Bush administration has declared that “the enemies of democracy” are responsible for the escalation of armed opposition in Afghanistan. Such claims are a farce. With the blessings of the UN Security Council, Washington manipulated the constitutional and electoral processes to ensure that political power is concentrated in the hands of its loyal puppet President Karzai.

Under the constitution, which was rubberstamped by an undemocratic *loya jirga* or tribal assembly, the national assembly has limited control over the president and his appointed ministers. Elections for the national assembly have been delayed for more than a year leaving Karzai in complete charge of government policy. The situation is unlikely to change substantially after the elections.

Karzai, with the backing of US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, scrapped the 2004 draft electoral law against the advice of UN advisers and in May imposed a new voting system. Under the revised law, political parties will not be able to display party symbols or run party lists. The Single Non-Transferable Voting system means that a large vote for a high-profile leader will undermine the ability of other party

candidates to be elected. The system will benefit those tribal leaders, militia commanders and warlords who command local support either through bribery, intimidation or ethnic and tribal loyalties.

By deliberately undercutting political parties, Karzai is counting on a national assembly that is deeply divided and thus politically impotent. Around 2,800 candidates are standing for just 249 assembly seats and another 3,000 are running for positions on 34 provincial councils. As a result of a lack of resources and adequate security, campaigning by most parties and candidates has been limited. As in the presidential poll last October, Karzai and his allies have the distinct advantage of being in power and thus in command of the government’s resources.

The International Crisis Group concluded in a report last month: “Little groundwork has been laid for legislative or locally devolved bodies. Instead all the eggs of state have been put in the basket of one man, the chief executive, President Hamid Karzai. Indeed the political environment created over three and a half years of transitional process must call into question the ability of the new representative bodies to have a real voice in the future of Afghanistan.”

Having installed their man in the presidency, the Bush administration is now pushing allies to take over the task of suppressing opposition to the occupation. Commenting on the current buildup and operations, Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, senior US commander in Afghanistan, told the media last week: “It’s not just about election day. We have been staying on the offensive over the summer months. We will be fighting all the way through the election and beyond.”

Earlier this month, NATO General Gerhard Back announced that NATO forces would assume responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan by the end of the year. To deal with the upsurge of fighting, Back said that NATO would require “more robust” rules of engagement. Some US troops would come under NATO command but increased contingents from other countries will allow the Pentagon to wind back its numbers in Afghanistan either to bolster its forces in Iraq or to prepare for new military adventures elsewhere.



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