Germany expands army presence in Afghanistan

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The German coalition government (Social Democratic Party—SPD—and the Green Party) has decided to expand its military presence in Afghanistan. Defence Minister Peter Struck (SPD) wants to supplement the Bundeswehr (armed forces) contingent from 2,250 to 3,000 soldiers. A special sitting of the German parliament at the beginning of October will debate the necessary resolution. Struck is reacting to intensified resistance confronting the regular Afghan army and foreign troops occupying the country, a resistance that is also being directed more and more against German soldiers. Like the US army in Iraq, the Bundeswehr faces are being dragged into a long and bloody colonial war in Afghanistan.

Struck announced his plans before setting off to visit German troops in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Officially, the Bundeswehr mission in the Hindu Kush is supposed to be conducting exclusively peacekeeping measures. According to the government, German soldiers are there to maintain order and secure the reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure in this bitterly poor country. But the circumstances of Struck's visit make clear that the Bundeswehr is entangled in an escalating war.

Just before Struck's departure, a grenade exploded at the Bundeswehr base in Feyzabad. It is pure coincidence that nobody was hurt or killed. The attack on a Bundeswehr facility was not an isolated case, as the commander of the troops stationed in Feyzabad, Colonel Peter Baierl, had to admit.

Recently, Bundeswehr soldiers have increasingly become targets for rebels and insurgents. Two weeks ago, a Bundeswehr vehicle only avoided being blown up by a homemade device at the last moment. At the beginning of August, a Bundeswehr convoy was attacked in the Sarobi district, 70 kilometres east of Kabul.

In mid-June, three trucks were blown up near the city of Kunduz. The explosion killed two Bundeswehr soldiers and five members of the Afghan army who were loading the truck with confiscated ammunition. Officially, the incident is recorded as an accident, but the Afghan authorities have not excluded a deliberate attack. One week before, in Kunduz, flyers were discovered calling for the immediate withdrawal of foreign troops.

In the east and the south of the country, resistance to the foreign occupation has escalated this year into open warfare. In the third week of August, there were 25 armed clashes with US soldiers. In the first three weeks in August, 100 insurgents were killed, a US military representative in Kabul reported. Since the beginning of the year, the fighting has claimed approximately 1,000 lives, including 50 US soldiers.

An expansion of the Bundeswehr mission in Afghanistan has been in the cards for some time. The Bundeswehr is relieving the US army and thereby indirectly supporting America's illegal war against Iraq.

German soldiers have been in Afghanistan for three and a half years. They are stationed there as part of the UN International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), under NATO command. In January 2002, around 1,000 soldiers were sent to the capital, Kabul. In October 2003, the mission was expanded to the northeast provinces around Kunduz and Feyzabad, and the troop strength increased to 2,250.

In May of this year, the first indications appeared in the press that the planned extension of the Bundeswehr mandate in October would be accompanied by an increase in troop levels. At first, talk was of a new upper limit of 2,500 soldiers. In June, this number was increased. The Ministry of Defence now wants to increase the German mission by around a third, to some 3,000 soldiers.

Defence Minister Struck also wants to drastically extend the field and type of operations. Previously, the Bundeswehr was only responsible for Kabul and the small provinces in the northeast around the cities of Kunduz and Feyzabad. Under the new mandate, troops could be stationed throughout the north of the country. A new support base for the troops is to be established in Masar-i-Sharif.

Moreover, the Bundeswehr in future will be acting more offensively in Afghanistan and deploying a greater troop presence. In contrast to the Bundeswehr's previous mandate, German soldiers are now to participate in the war on drugs

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by providing “logistic” support for the Afghan security forces.

Behind the scenes, the Bundeswehr is constantly increasing the level of armaments and equipment sent to Afghanistan, where it is able to test the most modern munitions, including an integrated infantry system suitable for offensive operations, and newly developed weapons technology for combat helicopters. A Defence Ministry spokesperson acknowledged to the press that plans also existed to send between four and six Tornado jet fighters.

The escalation of the Bundeswehr mission has also been accompanied by a change in the arguments with which it is justified. Whereas the public had previously been reassured with references to the alleged “stability” that was now developing in Afghanistan, and which the Bundeswehr was helping to maintain, the increasing instability is now cited as the reason for expanding the mission.

Struck said “further attacks on foreign troops should be expected.” And Baierl stressed that the position in the northeast provinces was “quite turbulent and not stable.”

The expansion of the German mission to the entire north of the country now being planned is not the end of the matter. By 2007, the Bundeswehr field of operations is to be gradually expanded to the whole country, as the press recently reported.

The SPD, and above all the Greens, who before entering government in 1998 still presented themselves as strict opponents of foreign military interventions, could only justify the Afghanistan mission to their supporters by presenting it as a peacekeeping mission. The September 11 attacks supplied the necessary pretext.

In reality, the conquest of the country and its ensuing occupation served purely imperialist aims. Afghanistan is of great strategic importance. It borders on China and Iran, with its oil resources, and serves as a springboard for the Caspian Sea, with its enormous oil and gas reserves. The Afghanistan war provided the US with a unique opportunity to gain a foothold in the central Asian regions of the former Soviet Union.

German imperialism did not want to miss out on this re-division of the world. Germany cannot be indifferent to who rules the roost in the Caspian Sea and in central Asia—hence its decision to participate in the military occupation of Afghanistan.

In an interview in June with the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Defence Minister Struck described these motives quite openly. “Our track [the SPD-Green Party government coalition] will be the transformation of the troops,” he said. “There are two sentences that sum this up. Firstly, Germany also has to be defended at the Hindu Kush. This is accepted, even if there is too little discussion about it for my liking. Secondly, the Bundeswehr’s field of operations is the whole world. Those who agree to a NATO response force, who agree with the concept of the [European Union] battle groups, should know that German soldiers must be ready to take responsibility in places that we still cannot conceive of today.”

Afghanistan is just the beginning. At the end of 2001, referring to Afghanistan and with an eye on German history, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder spoke of “removing the taboo from the military.” It was not accidental that the Bundeswehr established an air support base at Termez in Uzbekistan, which is now being considered as a stationing post for the Tornado fighters.

The significance of central Asia for the German government can be seen from the fact that it raised very little criticism of the Uzbek regime of President Karimov when he bloodily suppressed the rebellion in Andijan with up to 800 killed. In return, the Bundeswehr has been allowed to remain in the country—in contrast to the US, which was posed an ultimatum by the government in Tashkent to withdraw its troops completely from Uzbekistan within 180 days.

In the same interview, Struck also sought to inure the public to deaths and injuries of German soldiers. “People must know what soldiers have long understood: they can lose their life in any operation, including those in the Balkans or in Afghanistan,” he said. “We have lost four soldiers through suicide bombers. The population must be prepared. Because soldiers should be secure in the knowledge that the people are behind them.”

This warning that the population must pay the blood price for the interests of the ruling class should be taken very seriously. Barely a month ago, *Der Spiegel* reported that the Ministry of Defence has increased the budget for the “transfer and funeral of deceased soldiers” by 35 percent to €1 million.

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