

NATO troops deploy to suppress growing resistance in Afghanistan

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Hundreds more lives are likely to be lost in Afghanistan over the summer months as NATO troops are flung into operations in some of the most volatile areas of the country to subdue the ongoing armed resistance to the US-led occupation.

The British-commanded NATO Rapid Reaction Corp formally took over the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan on May 4. For most of the past four years, ISAF has consisted of some 10,000 troops from 30-odd countries. Its role has been mainly confined to Kabul and protecting the US puppet government headed by Hamad Karzai. Over the next few months, however, ISAF's sphere is being expanded to include large parts of southern Afghanistan and its size is swelling to over 17,000 personnel. As the additional NATO forces move in, the US military plans to reduce the number of American troops in Afghanistan from 23,000 to 16,500.

The NATO-led force will replace American troops in the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan, where ethnic Pashtun tribes and supporters of the former Taliban regime have fought a guerilla war since the November 2001 invasion. The intensity of the fighting is increasing. Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry of the US Army told a May 10 press briefing: "In southern Afghanistan, there have been increases in the incidents of violence that occurred over the spring compared to last year's baseline." A NATO spokesman, Major Luke Knittig, warned on May 5 that the NATO force was moving into "the toughest part of the country".

Most of the soldiers who are being sent to fight in southern Afghanistan are from Britain, Canada and the Netherlands, along with contingents from Australia, Denmark and Estonia. Eager to curry favour with Washington, the governments of these countries have reportedly agreed to a "no caveats" deployment—one in which there are no restrictions on how US and NATO commanders use the troops.

Around 2,300 Canadian troops took over the frontline role in Kandahar province in February. Seven have already been killed and 25 wounded. Some 3,500 British, 260 Danish and 100 Estonian troops are being deployed into Helmand province, while 1,600 Dutch troops, supported by British units and as many as 540 Australian special forces, infantry and engineers, are being thrust into the fighting in Uruzgan province. In each province, US troops are already deployed.

The NATO force will be used to establish four bases inside what is considered to be hostile territory, from where patrols can be dispatched to intimidate the population and suppress anti-occupation insurgents. Heavily-guarded reconstruction teams will be involved in limited infrastructure projects, in the hope of winning the "hearts and minds" of the very people they are engaged in repressing.

Combat casualties are inevitable. A Taliban leader, Mohammad Hanif Sherzad, told the London *Times* that the Islamic movement would "turn Afghanistan into a river of blood for the British". Invoking the defeat suffered by British imperialism when it tried to colonise the country in the nineteenth century, Sherzad declared: "We have beaten them before and we will beat them again."

According to BBC sources, a coalition of Afghan and Pakistani groups was formed earlier this year to step up attacks on both the American-led forces in Afghanistan and the pro-US Pakistani regime of Pervez Musharraf. As well as the remnants of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the alliance includes Hezb-i-Islami, the movement headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Hekmatyar is a Pashtun tribal leader and Islamic extremist with a sordid history. He was prominent in the anti-Soviet Afghan insurgency in the 1980s. It is believed that Hezb-i-Islami received hundreds of millions of dollars in US assistance and weapons. He served as prime

minister in one of the corrupt coalition governments that held power following the fall of the pro-Soviet regime. When the Taliban took power in 1996, he fled to Iran. He opposed the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and, in the aftermath of a CIA attempt to kill him in May 2002, linked up with the Taliban and Al Qaeda to fight the US occupation.

Collectively, the Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami command thousands of Pashtun fighters in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Large areas of the Pakistani border provinces of North and South Waziristan are effectively under their control, despite Musharraf's deployment of more than 70,000 Pakistani troops to repress the Pashtun tribes. Afghan guerillas move back and forward across the mountainous border to re-supply and rest, virtually safe from attack by the US military. Tribesmen have killed hundreds of Pakistani soldiers dispatched to prevent the cross-border movement.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban has gradually reestablished control over the provinces where the NATO troops are being deployed. A shopkeeper in Tirin Kot, the provincial capital of Uruzgan, told the *New York Times* this month: "The Taliban and Al Qaeda are everywhere. It is alright in the city, but if you go outside the city, they are everywhere and the people have to support them."

The *New York Times* reported: "The new governor, Maulavi Hakim Munib, 35, who took up his position just a month ago, controls only a 'bubble' around Tirin Kot, an American military officer said. The rest of the province is so thick with insurgents that all the districts are colored amber or red to indicate that on military maps in the nearby American base."

A similar situation exists in areas of Kandahar and Helmand provinces. In Helmand, the US occupation has so little control that more than half the schools have been shut down due to Taliban threats. US-led operations to destroy some of the 125,000 acres planted with opium poppies have alienated thousands of small farmers and enabled the Taliban to attract greater support. The Taliban is believed to be working with heroin traffickers in exchange for large amounts of cash, which it uses to purchase arms and pay fighters.

According to Radio Netherlands, Dutch military intelligence reported that the Taliban "now have modern weapons systems and new communications hardware, and they're sufficiently trained to use these items effectively". The report named "suicide-bomb attacks, ambushes and attacks on helicopters" as the greatest threats to Dutch troops.

The Taliban claimed earlier in the year that it had prepared 600 suicide bombers to carry out summer operations against US-led forces. The British *Independent* reported in March that Pakistani intelligence agents sympathetic to the anti-US resistance had supplied the Taliban with new battery packs for 18 to 20 Stinger heat-seeking missile launchers. In the 1980s, US-supplied Stingers were used to great effect by Afghan fighters to shoot down Soviet helicopters.

So far this month, several dozen Afghan soldiers, police and civilians have been killed or wounded in insurgent attacks; 10 American soldiers have died in a helicopter crash; two Italian soldiers have been killed by a roadside bomb; and an Australian soldier has been seriously wounded in a firefight.

The prospect of stepped-up fighting is the clearest answer to the Bush administration's declarations of "victory" and "progress" in Afghanistan. The reality is that the majority of the population despises the Kabul government as nothing more than a US puppet and regards the foreign troops as occupiers. The limited reconstruction has benefited only a corrupt layer in Kabul, while millions live in squalor and backwardness. The main concern of Washington has been the construction of the massive military base at Bagram, from where US airpower can be projected across Central Asia and the Middle East, including, potentially, against Iran.

The American, Canadian, European and Australian troops occupying Afghanistan are the cannon fodder necessary to suppress the growing armed resistance. NATO is preparing for the killing and dying in Afghanistan to go on for a long time. A confidential British Ministry of Defence briefing seen in March by the *London Times* gave the blunt estimate that it would take at least another five years to crush the insurgency in the south, and 15 to 20 years to fully convert Afghanistan into an American client state.



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