

US-led offensive in southern Afghanistan kills hundreds

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US-led military forces have launched a major operation aimed at crushing growing opposition in four provinces in southern Afghanistan ahead of a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) takeover in the region in August. Around 11,000 troops, including 2,300 from the US, 3,300 from Britain, 2,200 from Canada and 3,500 Afghan soldiers, backed by warplanes, are engaged in the biggest offensive since the US-led invasion in 2001.

Operation Mountain Thrust has claimed hundreds of Afghan lives since it began major operations on 15 June. Major General Benjamin Freakley, the US operational commander in Afghanistan, told Associated Press on 14 June that troops would attack “Taliban enemy sanctuary or safe haven areas” in Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan provinces.

The US military has launched the operation in response to a rising tide of attacks on US and allied forces, including roadside bombs and suicide attacks, since the beginning of the year. Outside of the main cities and towns in the Pashtun tribal areas of the south and east, anti-occupation militias operate freely. Some villages are under Taliban control.

The Pentagon is using its overwhelming firepower in an attempt to destroy enemy strongholds and establish its own bases through the region. In the last three months, it has conducted 340 air strikes against targets in Afghanistan, as compared to 160 in Iraq over the same period. The full weight of the US airforce, from B-52 bombers to small Predator drones, has been used.

Despite US claims that the operation is only targeting Taliban fighters, it is clear that ordinary villagers face bombings and hostile attacks. The Pentagon routinely describes all victims of military operations as Taliban, even if they turn out to be women and children.

According to a report in the Canadian newspaper, *La*

Presse, Canadian troops in Afghanistan are involved in the systematic intimidation of villagers. The article, described footage from France 2 television on 21 June in which a Canadian soldier threatened an audience of a few “silent men” by declaring, “my soldiers are very well trained. They are excellent shots, and you will die.”

In another sequence, Canadian soldiers used their boots to smash down doors. “Women and an old man leave. The man, who has a long white beard, is insulted,” the commentator stated. The soldier said to the old man “too bad for you if you don’t want to tell us where the Taliban are.”

An article in the *Guardian* on 20 June interviewed villagers who had fled to Qalat, the capital of Zabul province, after being threatened and tortured by Afghan soldiers. The troops were searching for militants who had attacked the army base in the Gaza area. Jamal Ludin, a 32-year-old grape farmer, said the troops lined him and 50 other men along a ditch before thrashing them with wooden poles and an electric cable and demanding “tell us where are the Taliban.”

The Afghan troops took Jamal’s money and searched his house without his permission. Others who fled the region provided the *Guardian* with other accounts of beatings, theft and searches.

The Pashtun areas of the south and east of the country have already endured more than four years of arbitrary searches, detentions and killings, creating widespread hostility to the occupation. The response of the US and its allies to the growing sympathy and support for anti-US fighters is to treat the whole population as the enemy.

The anti-US opposition is, however, not confined to these areas. In May, widespread anti-US rioting broke out in Kabul after US soldiers killed a civilian by

recklessly driving into a traffic jam. Subsequently four others were killed, when troops fired on a crowd protesting over the death.

Following the 2001 US-led invasion, the Bush administration's promised peace and prosperity has proven completely fraudulent. The depth of the social crisis is demonstrated by the statistics: only 23 percent of the population has access to safe drinking water, 12 percent has basic sanitation and 6 percent has access to electricity. An estimated 32 percent of people are unemployed.

Speaking to the *Washington Post* in late June, one Western diplomat summed up the situation: "There is an awful feeling that everything is lurching downward. Nearly five years on, there is no rule of law, no accountability. The Afghans know it is all a charade, and they see us as not only complicit but actively involved."

In an attempt to bolster its besieged puppet regime, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice flew to Kabul on 28 June for talks with President Hamid Karzai. Her main pledge was a long-term US military commitment—that is, a continued American occupation. Then in comments that bear no relation to reality, she declared that the government was making "great progress", praised Karzai's "strength, wisdom and courage" and said he was "doing an extremely difficult job well."

Outside of Kabul, the Afghan regime has little control and relies completely on foreign troops as well as a network of local and regional warlords and militia. As his authority in southern Pashtun areas has crumbled, Karzai has increasingly blamed neighbouring Pakistan for failing to do enough to prevent the cross-border movement of anti-US militia. Islamabad, which has already deployed 70,000 Pakistani troops to the border areas, has bitterly rejected the claims. In part, Rice's trip to Kabul and Islamabad was aimed at defusing tensions between the two US allies.

Clearly concerned at his growing unpopularity, Karzai has postured as a critic of the latest US offensive. More than 500 Afghans died in the early stages of the operation between May 15 and June 15. On June 24, before Rice's visit, Karzai declared: "It is not acceptable for us that in all this fighting, Afghans are dying. In the last three to four weeks, 500 to 600 Afghans were killed. [Even] if they are Taliban, they

are sons of this land." The emptiness of these remarks is underscored by Karzai's silence once Rice arrived.

Karzai has attempted to gag any opposition in the Afghan media. An unsigned 24-point list was sent out to all media outlets last month, ordering them not to publish reports or interviews against the government's foreign policy or against the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. The directive also stated that the media should not characterise Afghan forces as "weak" or describe émigrés holding posts in the Afghan government as "westernised". Additionally, journalists were directed not to refer to former Mujahadeen leaders in the government and state bureaucracy as "warlords".

The sensitivity of the Karzai government indicates just how isolated it is. Abdul Qadar Noorzai, a human rights commission official in Kandahar, told the *Washington Post* that "government" in the south mostly consisted of "corrupt, local warlords who allied themselves with US forces." According to Noorzai, these local strongmen have taken control over the weak state bureaucracies and police forces, and run much of the opium trade.

The present US-led offensive in southern Afghanistan demonstrates that Washington is determined to maintain its grip over the country, which occupies a crucial strategic position adjacent to resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as South Asia. While NATO troops from Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, Australia and several other countries are due to take over key operational tasks in Afghanistan, the US will retain overall command. Far from ending the opposition to the occupation, the build-up of troops and their repressive methods will only fuel greater popular resentment and hostility, which is rapidly transforming Afghanistan into another military quagmire.



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