

UK sends more troops to southern Afghanistan as fighting escalates

Harvey Thompson
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British Defence Secretary Des Browne has announced the deployment of almost 900 extra troops to southern Afghanistan.

The reinforcements—which will increase UK troop levels from the current 3,600 to around 4,500 by October—will be sent to the volatile Helmand province. It will include 320 engineers from 28 Regiment Royal Engineers in order to “accelerate the reconstruction effort,” the government said.

A company from 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines is to provide “force protection” for engineers and an extra infantry company, from the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, will also provide more mobile forces.

Some 450 reservists are also being called up to fill posts “in theatre.” A “small increase” in HQ staff and medical and logistical support is also planned and additional military support helicopters—probably Chinooks and Lynxs—will also be made available.

Browne’s emergency statement to the House of Commons came just days after the death of another British soldier from fighting in Helmand province—the sixth in less than a month.

On July 5, Private Damien Raymond Jackson, 19, of South Shields, Tyne and Wear, from the 3 Para Battle Group, was shot and killed while on patrol near the town of Sangin. In a statement, his father Daniel said the family wanted it to be known that their pride in their son did not mean they were “supporting or condoning a government policy which has placed our young men and women in such dreadful danger.”

Four days earlier, Corporal Peter Thorpe, 27, from Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, and Lance Corporal Jabron Hashmi, 24, from Bordersley Green, Birmingham, were killed when a rocket-propelled grenade hit the government compound in Sangin where they were stationed. An Afghan interpreter was also killed in the attack and other soldiers were also reported to have been wounded.

The previous week, on June 27, Capt. David Patten, 38, from Aghadowey, near Coleraine, Northern Ireland, and Sgt. Paul Bartlett, 35, were killed in Sangin valley, northern Helmand province, when a rocket-propelled grenade destroyed their vehicle. And on June 11, Capt. Jim Philipsson, 29, from St. Albans in Hertfordshire was killed in a firefight while on mobile patrol in Helmand province.

Afghanistan has been gripped by the bloodiest spate of

violence since the US-led invasion of the country in 2001. A series of firefights in the past six months has seen the emergence of an insurgency that is highly motivated, organized and well armed. Attacks have included troop ambushes and roadside bombs.

Around 10,000 US, Canadian, British and Afghan forces have deployed across southern Afghanistan as part of “Operation Mountain Thrust,” ostensibly in a bid to loosen the Taliban’s grip on the region. In the unforeseen resistance encountered by the Coalition troops—from a coalition of armed farmers, drug barons and Taliban fighters—at least 20 soldiers have been killed across the country since the offensive started in May. Most of the fatalities have been in the south. A total of 65 foreign soldiers have died in Afghanistan this year.

Although Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) have gone to great lengths to present the troop deployment as an anticipated increase in military personnel, the tell-tale signs of panic have been in evidence.

Browne’s announcement came on the same day that a former defence minister, Doug Henderson, broke ranks to criticise the lack of clarity surrounding the UK military presence in Afghanistan. While declaring his loyalty to the government’s general policy, Henderson said, “Until we have a political purpose our soldiers are sitting targets and should stop patrolling the streets and withdraw to their barracks.

“They are [currently] neither a peacekeeping nor a fighting force. We need to know what the political purpose of this force is, then what the military purpose is. Is the political purpose to get to province leaders to work with [Afghan president] Hamid Karzai, or to impose his men on them? Until that is revealed our soldiers are sitting targets for any insurgent who wants to take a pop at them.”

Prime Minister Tony Blair evaded any direct answer, stating that British troops were doing “the most extraordinary and heroic job,” which was important for the security of the wider world and vital “to our security here in this country.”

A still more forthright attack on the government’s policy in Afghanistan, and a revealing insight into the disquiet felt amongst sections of the military elite, was contained in a BBC TV interview on July 9 with Tim Collins, former colonel of 1st Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment. Collins accused the

government of lacking any coherent strategy at all for Afghanistan.

“We have a British government that has no idea of what it wants to do. It’s invited the Army to go to Iraq, to Afghanistan, and do stuff. It would be a bit like giving your keys to builders and say go and do some stuff in my house,” he told the BBC.

The criticisms brought about a closing of ranks amongst the parliamentary parties. When it came to the invasion of Afghanistan, the established parties never exhibited even the small tactical differences that separated them on the US-led invasion of Iraq. And the latest chain of events has provoked a near frenzy at the possibility of “mission failure.”

Conservative Defence Secretary Liam Fox gave his full backing to the government, stating that the price of failure in Afghanistan was “intolerable.” Liberal Democrat leader, Sir Menzies Campbell, said it was essential that more troops were sent.

“This is a deployment which cannot be allowed to fail ... if this were to fall apart, then it would be deeply, deeply damaging to the stability of Afghanistan and it would also be deeply damaging to the credibility of NATO,” he said.

The government is aware that there is deep popular suspicion and cynicism of the British Army’s presence in Afghanistan nearly five years on from the toppling of the Taliban regime and the installation of the US-puppet administration of Hamid Karzai.

The defence secretary betrayed the government’s nervousness over the issue when he accused the BBC of endangering the lives of British troops by interviewing Taliban leaders in southern Afghanistan. One was heard saying that British forces were in Afghanistan “not for reconstruction but to fight a war,” Browne complained. “That puts our troops at risk,” he said.

“Every word said here in Parliament or the media” was used by the Taliban, which had an “impressive information operation,” Browne warned. He continued, “The level of risks our troops take on is significant. It does not help their safety for people to say there is confusion.”

The BBC responded, “It was entirely legitimate to broadcast the Taliban’s view that the purpose of the British deployment is to fight war against them.”

The call for a more ruthless clampdown on the insurgency is also being answered by the use of British Apache attack helicopters. These have become a key battlefield weapon of the British Army and have inflicted scores of casualties. The £38 million planes are armed with 30mm cannon and laser-guided rockets, and have been used to offer cover to embattled infantry soldiers and kill insurgents.

“People die. There are many casualties but we don’t sit around and count them,” said an Apache pilot who requested anonymity.

Another pilot said it was often difficult to tell a Taliban fighter from an Afghan policeman: “The Taliban and the police

look the same—black beards and dark clothes.”

The Apaches are the latest addition to a multinational fleet of war planes that stalk the skies of southern Afghanistan. The US has deployed a wide range of helicopter gunships, B-1 bombers, and A-10 “warthogs,” named after the frenzied squealing noise made by a Gatling gun that fire 3,900 rounds a minute.

The Netherlands, which is due to send 1,500 troops to Uruzgan province from August, has also dispatched F-16 and Apaches.

The warplanes have accounted for the vast majority of an estimated 600 deaths of insurgents, Taliban fighters and other Afghans since May. But as one pilot said, no amount of air-power can eliminate the fundamental danger facing the vast majority of troops. “It doesn’t matter how many Apaches or armoured Land Rovers you have. That still won’t stop a guy with a fuse and a detonator planting a bomb on the side of the road.”

Browne has stressed repeatedly that UK troops will not act as a drugs police, or destroy poppy fields, but this does not count for much. Afghanistan currently produces 90 percent of the world’s opium, and 20 percent of this is produced in Helmand province. For many of the opium producers, the presence of UK troops is seen as a direct threat to their interests and so they have also swelled the ranks of the insurgency.

But the routine depiction of the Afghan insurgency as simply comprising the Taliban and drug barons obscures the increasing numbers of young fighters drawn from rural areas far from Kabul that have witnessed no improvement in their living conditions since the US-led invasion—with many areas experiencing a decline since the fall of the Taliban regime. Also unreported is the still larger segment of the population throughout the south that harbours the fighters out of a deep-seated mistrust of the continued presence of Coalition forces.

Although the leaders of the present British government wear their ignorance of history as a badge of honour, there are those both in the UK and Afghanistan who do not have such short memories. Britain remains the colonial power that has wrought more suffering on the Afghan people—eclipsing even the US—and led its armies to more disastrous defeats in Afghanistan than any other. The announcement by Browne of UK troop increases will inevitably increase the infamy of British imperialism in the region and compel ever more Afghans to confront it.



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