

Death toll rises as NATO expands operations in Afghanistan

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8 August 2006

July was officially the bloodiest month in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion of the country in November 2001.

It is estimated that so far this year at least 1,700 people have been killed in fighting across the country. The death toll is a result of operations by foreign troops—involving heavy air bombardment of villages mainly in the south—and attacks by insurgent guerrillas, armed drug barons and Taliban fighters.

The dead include an as-yet-unspecified number of Afghan civilians, several hundred insurgents, scores of Afghan police and troops and more than 70 foreign soldiers.

Despite the news media's attempts to either ignore or bury reports from Afghanistan, on two days in mid-July the country suffered higher casualties than even Iraq and Lebanon. All indications from the first few days of this month are that the cycle of violence and destruction across Afghanistan is escalating.

As in Iraq, US-led coalition forces have refused to keep a body count of the dead since the 2001 invasion.

Below are some significant events during the past few weeks:

On July 15, UK forces called in US planes to drop 500-pound bombs on the town of Nawzad in Helmand province.

Civilians told the BBC that aircraft dropped at least three bombs, destroying shops and a school. Witnesses said there were many civilian deaths and injuries. People in the town said no warning was given by coalition forces that bombing would begin, but British forces defended the air strike. A newly built two-storey school received a direct hit, causing its concrete roof to collapse and much of the town's market of 150 shops were reduced to rubble.

The town has become a front line between a small force of British soldiers and insurgent fighters who are said to be bombarding them from just a few hundred metres away. UK commanders said they had been under constant attack for the past two weeks and the "Taliban fighters" were close to "overrunning the base" when the US air strike was called in.

There are reports of between 25 and 200 people being

killed, but it is almost impossible to verify.

Seven days later, two Canadian soldiers were killed and eight others were wounded in a suicide bomb attack near the coalition military base in Kandahar.

The soldiers were travelling in a Bison armoured vehicle, part of a support convoy that was returning to Kandahar airfield. It was the most serious attack on Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan since their arrival in February 2002. About 2,300 Canadian soldiers are based in Kandahar. The death toll has now risen to 19 soldiers and one diplomat.

An hour later, a second suicide bomber attacked the convoy about 100 metres from the first attack. Six Afghan civilians were killed in the heavily populated area, and 30 were injured.

On July 30, a bomb in a police car in the eastern city of Jalalabad killed at least eight people. The blast targeted the convoy of Gul Afgha Sherzai, the governor of Nangarhar. Sherzai escaped unhurt, but officials said five police and three children were killed, while 16 people were wounded.

In two separate incidents, in the south, US-led coalition forces—backed by "lethal" air power—and Afghan police say they have "killed 26 suspected Taliban" fighters, while four more militants died when land mines they were planting in the former southern Taliban stronghold of Kandahar exploded.

On July 31, NATO assumed security responsibility from US troops for the volatile south, (the six provinces of Day Kundi, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Uruzgan and Zabul), commencing the first major land offensive outside of Europe in the organisation's 57-year history. The NATO takeover allows the US military to pull around 3,000 troops out of the country.

NATO forces are now deployed in northern, western and southern Afghanistan. By the end of the year, the American military also wants NATO troops to take over from US ground forces now deployed in the east of the country.

Lieutenant General David Richards, commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), based in Kabul, took over a multinational force of more than

8,000 mainly British, US, Canadian and Dutch troops.

In recent weeks, US and UK troops, mainly from Third Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, have provoked and confronted a rising tide of the insurgency that has killed an estimated 700 militants and 19 Western troops.

On August 1, three British soldiers were killed after a vehicle patrol was ambushed by militants in the north of Helmand province. It was the deadliest attack to date on British forces in the south. Nearly 4,000 UK troops are currently deployed in Afghanistan, the majority in Helmand.

The incident took place amid reports of heavy fighting in the Musa Qala district of Helmand. The ministry of defence said an armoured vehicle patrol had come under attack by “insurgents who were armed with rocket propelled grenades and heavy machine guns.”

The town of Musa Qala has been the scene of considerable activity since the end of May, when it was briefly occupied by an insurgent force several hundred strong. The latest attacks bring to 10 the number of British troops who have been killed in action in Afghanistan in the past two months, and 17 since the 2001 invasion.

UK troops are presently adopting a new policy under which they are pulling back from outlying posts to more easily defensible positions near the provincial capital Lashkar Gar and the heavily fortified Camp Bastion.

On August 3, at least 21 people were killed and 13 injured in a suicide car bomb attack on a market in Panjwayi town in Kandahar province. The blast left a 1.5m-wide crater and scorched several shops. Bloodied caps and shoes lay in the road, the *Associated Press* news agency reported. A convoy of NATO troops was moving through the area when the attack took place but went unscathed.

Three Canadian soldiers with NATO were killed in a rocket-propelled grenade attack on the outskirts of Kandahar city. Six other soldiers were wounded. The rockets were fired from a school near the village of Pashmul, NATO said. Earlier, another Canadian soldier was killed, also near Kandahar city, and four others were injured in two separate roadside bombs targeting military patrols.

And local officials said 10 Taliban fighters were killed by Afghan and NATO forces in the neighbouring Helmand province during a raid on their hideout.

As foreign troops kill and wound large numbers of people across the country and fuel an ever-widening insurgency, the client administration of Hamid Karzai is turning to more draconian methods to contain and divert the anger and frustration of growing numbers of Afghan civilians.

In addition to issuing press censorship regulations last month, the US-puppet administration has been increasingly blatant in its connivance with hard-line religious elements in and around the government.

A council of Islamic clerics pressed the Afghan government to reestablish a religious police force to make sure Shariah law is obeyed. The proposal was referred to parliament for consideration July 15.

Previously, the council’s officers patrolled the streets, punishing men for not having full beards and women for not wearing the burqa. The religious police also punished anyone caught listening to music or drinking alcohol. They were allowed to detain without trial Afghans considered to be flouting their interpretation of Islam.

The parliament elected in Afghanistan last year is a mixture of religious conservatives, old political and faction leaders, and younger independents.

On July 17, Afghan authorities destroyed 630 bottles of wine and 3,300 cans of beer in a public anti-alcohol campaign in the capital, Kabul. In scenes strongly reminiscent of the Taliban days, cartons of wine and beer were stacked up in a park and smashed, set alight and rolled over by a bulldozer in front of assembled journalists.

Also in July, officials deported seven Chinese women for prostitution and serving alcohol in Kabul. The Afghan government has announced plans to reestablish a Vice and Virtues Ministry. The Department of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice was disbanded after the toppling of the Taliban government in 2001.

Last month, Karzai ordered the “complete expulsion” of a group of Koreans who had arrived in the country to take part in a peace march organised by an evangelical organisation. A group of 35 Koreans who arrived at Kabul airport on Tuesday were the first to be stopped. Afghan police wielded metal clubs to subdue them. Last February, thousands of Afghans took to the streets to protest the release of Abdur Rahman, 41, who was facing the death penalty for converting to Christianity. Rahman was later released from prison and smuggled to Italy.

Almost five years after a US-led invasion that cynically promised a brighter future, life expectancy is 42 years in Afghanistan and 75 percent of the population remains illiterate. Half the country’s girls are too fearful to go to school and more than a third of the working population is officially unemployed. There are now a million hard drug users across Afghanistan (with 40,000 opiate addicts in Kabul alone), and the country is mired in a military conflagration without an end in sight.



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