

# NATO in disarray over military crisis in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is becoming a military and political disaster for the NATO alliance, which is embroiled in the Bush administration's attempt to subjugate the country. As the fifth anniversary of the overthrow of the Taliban regime approaches, much of Afghanistan is in the hands of warlords with links to international drug cartels or falling back under the control of the Taliban.

Summing up the situation confronting the US-led occupation, a lengthy report published this month by the European-based thinktank Senlis declared: "Afghanistan's security situation is unravelling. The international military coalitions have failed to realise the expectations they created in 2001. Both US-led Operation Enduring Freedom and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (NATO-ISAF) have missed the opportunity to bridge the gap between the Western and the Muslim worlds. On the contrary, they are currently fuelling frustration and resentment among the Afghan population who increasingly distrust the US and NATO-ISAF forces they first welcomed with hope."

Condemning the entire occupation as a failure, the report wrote: "When international military forces first intervened in Afghanistan, much was made of the 'winning of hearts and minds', but this campaign has been lost. Locals assert that neither the 'foreigners' nor the Afghan government had made any efforts to counteract the detrimental effects of drought, poverty and poppy eradication in their provinces, and locals' apparent fear of the international military forces show that the 'hearts and minds' campaign has failed. Anger is now commonly expressed in southern Afghanistan, and many Afghans who supported the international forces now speak of them with hatred."

Similar assessments have been published in the US and British media. The British *Financial Times* wrote

on September 5 that "the headlines coming out of Afghanistan have never been so bleak". Drug money, it declared, "is fuelling the weapons trade as well as corruption, as poppy fields spread like a bloodstain across the country". Afghanistan, the newspaper noted, "is breaking all records for producing opium". The most recent UN estimate is that 6,100 tonnes of Afghan opium has been harvested, enough to cause world heroin production to soar by one third.

The *New York Times* on September 5 described areas of the province of Helmand as "the epicentre of a Taliban resurgence and an explosion in drug cultivation that has claimed the lives of 106 US and NATO soldiers this year and doubled American casualty rates countrywide". The article provided a detailed account of the utter failure of the US occupation after the 2001 invasion to address the economic and social grievances of the population or provide stable government and law and order.

The US-led occupation force and the Kabul government of President Hamad Karzai exert next to no authority in southern Afghanistan. The *New York Times* noted that "small numbers of Afghans are openly collaborating with the Taliban" while others, "unsure of the American commitment and disillusioned with Mr Karzai, sit by and dare not resist them".

The NATO-led ISAF assumed security responsibility for Helmand and five other southern Afghan provinces on July 31. However it is undermanned and ill-equipped to cope with the scale of the anti-occupation insurgency raging throughout the region. The entire ISAF force consists of only 19,000 personnel and just 8,000—mainly British, Canadian, Dutch and Australian soldiers—are deployed in the south. A similar number of American troops are still in Afghanistan, with primary responsibility for the country's eastern provinces.

Constant fighting is taking place in the east against Taliban, Al Qaeda and tribal opponents of the US occupation.

British and Canadian troops are involved in bitter fighting in Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Some 2,000 Canadian, US and Afghan government troops are currently engaged in “Operation Medusa” to drive out Taliban fighters from the Panjwahi district to the west of Kandahar city. Towns and villages allegedly controlled by the Taliban have been subjected to massive air and ground bombardments.

NATO claims to have killed over 400 guerillas since the operation began on September 2 but its offensive to regain control in the south is proving costly. The Canadian military has lost 32 dead in Afghanistan, with most of the fatalities occurring in the past two months in fighting around Kandahar. The British military suffered its largest loss of life in a single day on September 2, when a Nimrod reconnaissance plane crashed for unexplained reasons. Fourteen airmen were killed. Total British losses in Afghanistan now stand at 40. Overall occupation deaths in Afghanistan so far this year are 151, compared with 130 in all 2005 and 58 in 2004.

The brutality of the NATO campaign is also intensifying local Afghan opposition to the occupation. Captain Leo Docherty, an aide-de-camp to a British commander in Helmand province, resigned his commission in August and publicly denounced the operations in southern Afghanistan as a “textbook case of how to screw up a counter-insurgency”.

Docherty accused the British military of being “grotesquely clumsy” in its conduct of the war. “We said we’ll be different to the Americans who were bombing and strafing villages,” Docherty said, “then behaved exactly like them”. At least 2,600 Afghans have been killed by occupation forces this year.

The Senlis report provided a glimpse of the hatred being engendered by US-NATO operations in Afghanistan. A militiaman from Kandahar, who had initially collaborated with the occupation forces, told the thinktank: “The American, the British, and the Canadians—they are all the same to us. They lie to us, they lie to each other, and they lie to their own people. People are starving here. You are destroying the crops the poor people use to feed their families. You are a cruel people and we want you to leave our country. I

will fight with the Taliban when they come. They are Afghans who will help the poor people.”

There are already signs that the crisis in Afghanistan could undermine NATO as divisions emerge over the provision of troops for the fighting. On September 4, the UN envoy to Afghanistan, Tom Koenigs, denounced the “around 71 caveats” that exist on how the ISAF can use the 2,800 German troops currently deployed in Kabul. Under their rules of engagement, they cannot be used for offensive missions. Koenigs declared the German force had been “lucky to be deployed in the relatively peaceful north but they now must accept having to go to the south”. The *Financial Times* warned in an editorial on September 5 that “not just the future of Afghanistan but the future of NATO is at stake”.

Last Friday, the NATO commander in Europe, US General James Jones, called on the alliance to urgently send 2,500 reinforcements and more helicopters to the fighting in southern Afghanistan. During meetings over the weekend, Germany, France and Turkey were placed under intense pressure by the US and Britain to commit the requested personnel. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that “military sources came close to accusing some European allies of reneging on their promises to provide adequate forces” to the Afghanistan war.

With the prospect of months of bitter combat and inevitable casualties fighting an entrenched and popularly supported insurgency, however, no country has stepped forward as of yet to provide the additional troops. Less than two months after taking over operational control of the southern provinces, NATO forces are sinking into the same quagmire as their American counterparts.



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