

NATO troops launch new offensives in Afghanistan

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US and British-led NATO forces have launched new offensives in the southern and western regions of Afghanistan in recent days, killing scores of people. The offensives are part of a military campaign begun in March to retake parts of the country not currently under control of occupation forces and the puppet government of Hamid Karzai.

In southern Afghanistan on Monday, 3,000 troops launched operations in the Sangin Valley, near the town of Gereshk. Those involved included 1,000 British soldiers and 1,000 troops from the Afghan National Army, along other forces from the US, the Netherlands, Denmark, Estonia and Canada.

The NATO forces are seeking to crush growing opposition to the foreign occupation, particularly pronounced in the south, among organizations said to be allied with the former Taliban regime. Gereshk, located in Helmand province, is a strategically important city, which lies along the road from Kandahar in the south to Herat in the west.

British Lieut. Col. Carver said that the offensive “is part of longer-term plan to restore the whole of Helmand to government control. You have to do it one piece at a time,” he said. The broader offensive in the south, dubbed “Operation Achilles,” began in March.

There are no reports yet on the number of people killed in the Monday’s operations. However, a US statement has said that at least 150 “Taliban and foreign fighters” have been killed in the Sangin district of Helmand province during the past three weeks.

At the same time, US-led forces in the western province of Herat have killed at least 136 people during the past several days, with reports indicating that most were civilians. The US military itself reported that it killed 87 people in a 14-hour engagement on Sunday, and that 49 were killed in a separate assault on Friday.

One US soldier was also killed during that incident.

The Pentagon—as is routine—claimed that all those killed were “Taliban,” but protesters said that they were civilians. Thousands of Afghans demonstrated against the violence, gathering at the district government headquarters in Shindand in the west, which is also the location of a police compound.

According to a Reuters report, “Police reinforcements were sent in to control the protesters and block them from marching on the base. At least 20 civilians were wounded during police firing, several residents told a Reuters reporter in the region by phone.” Local officials in the Afghan government sought to distance themselves from the US-led assault, claiming that Afghan police and military forces were not informed or involved.

The latest round of military assaults by NATO forces in the west are the deadliest since 150 people were killed along the southern border of Pakistan in January. They also indicate an expansion of military operations, since most violence so far has been confined to the south and the east.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people protested the killing of six people, including two women, and the wounding of two children during a raid by US troops in eastern Afghanistan, near the city of Jalalabad.

Col. Ghafoor Khan, spokesman for the police chief in the eastern province of Nangarhar, told the *New York Times*, “Six civilians, including two women, were killed in this incident, and eight others were detained by coalition forces.” US forces claimed that the two women were killed by accident, and the four others were Taliban supporters.

These killings were located in the same region in which 12 civilians were massacred, and 35 more were injured, by US Marine Special Operations forces

angered when their vehicle was targeted by a suicide bomb attack on March 4. As in the latest round of killings, the US military responded by trying to cover up the atrocity, but has since been forced to acknowledge that the marines did not come under fire from those killed.

An investigation by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights commission found that those killed in the incident were unarmed workers and pedestrians who happened to be in the area at the time. Criminal charges may now be filed against several of the marines involved in the massacre. If this happens, however, it will only be used to as part of an attempt to obscure the broader US policy of repression of the Afghan population.

These killings are only the beginning of an escalation of the US-led counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan during the spring and summer, even as more troops are also being sent into Iraq. In addition to the US and British forces, in recent months Australia and Germany have also agreed to send additional equipment and soldiers to Afghanistan in an effort to crush mounting opposition.

This policy has complete bipartisan support in the US itself. One of the principal concerns of critics of the Bush administration's policy in Iraq, including leading figures in the Democratic Party, has been that the troop escalation has made it more difficult for the US to maintain control of Afghanistan. Not only is Afghanistan a critical region for US geo-strategic interests in its own right, located near the oil- and gas-rich region of Central Asia, but it would also be an important base for any US operations against Iran.

In the war funding bill passed by Congress last week, Democrats supplied the military with more money than the Bush administration had requested, including an additional \$1 billion for bolstering US forces in Afghanistan.



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