

# Afghanistan: mounting attacks on US/NATO troops

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Increasing attacks by Taliban-linked guerillas against American, NATO and Afghan army troops across much of southern Afghanistan are fuelling recriminations over the US policies and tactics that have stoked the intense hatred among the Afghan people for the occupation forces.

The NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) lost six dead and at least 11 wounded between Friday and Sunday, taking the total number of occupation fatalities this year to 135—68 American and 67 NATO.

Three American troops and an Afghan interpreter were killed on Saturday when their patrol was attacked in an area of Nangahar province, close to the Pakistani border. A soldier of unspecified nationality was also killed by a roadside bomb in an eastern province. He was probably American as US troops are conducting most of the ISAF operations in the east.

One British soldier was killed and five wounded on Saturday when they were ambushed in the Sangin district of Helmand, where a 6,000-strong British force is deployed. Another British soldier died of his wounds on Friday, after he was shot during a clash with guerillas in the same area. A second was evacuated with what the military described as “non-life threatening” injuries.

Since the October 2001 invasion to overthrow the Taliban fundamentalist regime, 425 US and 226 NATO soldiers have lost their lives. There are no official figures on the total number of casualties that have been suffered by the poorly equipped Afghan soldiers and police hired by the occupation. They have a far higher casualty rate, however. In just one ambush in the western province of Badghis on Friday, at least seven government troops were killed and eight vehicles destroyed. Without US air support, even greater losses would have been suffered. An air strike drove off the attackers and allegedly killed 20 guerillas.

Canadian casualties in Afghanistan, which already stand at 66 dead and over 280 wounded, continue to rise. Five troops from the Quebec-based Royal 22e Regiment were injured Saturday during an ambush southwest of Kandahar, the main city in southern Afghanistan and the former stronghold of the Taliban. Guerillas hit their armoured vehicle with a roadside bomb and then opened fire with rocket-propelled grenades.

Australian troops in the province of Uruzgan were lucky to escape without suffering deaths or injuries during two guerilla attacks last week. A detachment was involved in a firefight for over 90 minutes on Friday and was forced to call in backup from Dutch Apache helicopter gunships. Two days earlier, a patrol

traded fire with Afghan fighters for two hours.

Fighting has intensified in Uruzgan this month. Three times last week, a sizeable guerilla force launched rare assaults on a lightly-manned US base, Firebase Anaconda. More than 20 alleged Taliban were killed last Tuesday during the first. Two attacks on Saturday were also repulsed by US troops and aerial bombardments, leaving between 5 and 10 more Afghans dead. An American military spokeswoman told the Associated Press that the engagements may have been a “rehearsal” by the guerillas for an attempt to over-run the base. US commanders, she said, were expecting “a large, full-scale attack in the near future”.

While the insurgents have been reported as Taliban, they may well be local tribesmen seeking revenge on occupation troops. In late July, Australian forces opened fire on two separate occasions on civilian vehicles approaching their checkpoints. A truck driver was killed in one incident and two young children seriously wounded in the second. Last week, Dutch troops in the province reportedly gunned down a motorcyclist who did not slow down in time.

Civilian casualties inflicted by US air strikes have been openly blamed by a British officer for the level of attacks on their forces in Helmand. An unnamed “senior British commander” told the *New York Times* last week that he had asked the US military to withdraw its small special forces’ units operating in the province. The indiscriminate bombing missions they call in when attacked are causing large numbers of innocent deaths. British bases and patrols bear the brunt of Afghan reprisals.

Independent researcher Michael Shaikh told the British *Observer* on Sunday that some 348 civilians have been killed in Helmand by US and NATO operations in the first six months of 2007. Shaikh described it as a “very bloody period” and accused the occupation troops of “indiscriminate and disproportionate” use of force.

The carnage is continuing unabated. On August 4, the puppet Afghan government in Kabul declared that 100 “Taliban” had been killed by an air strike on an alleged insurgent gathering in Helmand. Hospitals in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, however, took in at least 40 wounded civilians. A government defence ministry spokesman, General Mohammed Zahir Azimi, contemptuously dismissed suggestions that many of the dead were non-combatants. “How can you distinguish when someone is a civilian or not? When he has a gun on the ground he’s a civilian, but when he has it on his shoulder he’s not?” he declared.

The *New York Times* article cited accounts of recent US strikes in Afghanistan by 38 percent, withdrew 20 percent of its troops and on two villages in Helmand in response to reports of “Taliban” activity. Some 21 civilians were killed when the village of Sarwan Qala was bombed on May 8. Three days later, 18 wounded civilians from the nearby village of Sar Ghar were brought to a British base for medical assistance. The father of two seriously injured children told a journalist that men from the village were so furious that they had left to join local anti-occupation fighters.

A local man named Mahmadullah declared: “The Americans are killing and destroying a village just in pursuit of one man [Osama bin Laden]. So now we understand that the Americans are a curse on us and they are just here to destroy Afghanistan. They can tell the difference between men and women, children and animals, but they are just killing everyone.”

Mahmadullah bitterly denounced the monetary compensation offered by NATO forces to families who have lost loved ones: “First they kill me, and then they rebuild my house? What is the point when I am dead and my son is dead? This is not of any worth to us.”

With no end to the war in Afghanistan in sight, unease in the US over the quagmire was registered in a front page feature in the weekend *New York Times* entitled “How a ‘good war’ in Afghanistan went bad”. Authored by David Rohde and leading correspondent David Sanger, the article reviewed the systematic failure of the Bush administration to take steps to stabilise Afghanistan as a US puppet state. Instead, by early 2002, just months after overthrowing the Taliban, the White House and Pentagon had shifted their focus and resources to preparing the illegal invasion of Iraq—long before such plans were officially confirmed.

Despite Bush’s promise in April 2002 of an Afghan version of the post-World War II Marshall Plan to rebuild the war-ruined society, his administration left Afghanistan mired in poverty, despair and anarchy. Outside of Kabul, key provinces were allowed to come back under the sway of hated warlords who the Taliban had displaced. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld nevertheless declared in Kabul on May 1, 2003: “We clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilisation and reconstruction activities. The bulk of the country is permissive, it’s secure.”

Just \$19 billion has been spent since 2002 in Afghanistan, the bulk of which has gone to arming the largely ineffectual and unmotivated government security forces, not reconstruction. An aide to Afghan president Hamid Karzai told the *Times*: “It was state-building on the cheap. It was a duct-tape approach.” One of the main industries is growing and processing opium for the heroin trade, with over 90 percent of the world supply produced in Afghanistan.

Moreover, one of the largest “reconstruction” projects has not been one that provides any benefits to the Afghan people. It has been the development of the Bagram air base into a world class airport capable of landing the entire arsenal of the US air force and projecting US air power against Iran, China, Russia and any other potential rival.

In 2006, with Iraq becoming a military and political disaster for the White House, the US slashed financial assistance to

insisted that its NATO allies take responsibility for fighting the Taliban. The British, Canadian and Dutch governments agreed to supply troops as cannon fodder.

During the same period, the opposition to foreign occupation and its puppet regime, combined with desperate social conditions, boosted a resurgent Taliban in the predominantly ethnic Pashtun south of Afghanistan. Citing US state department official Ronald Neumann, the *Times* noted that the insurgents were mostly Afghans who had taken up arms “because a local governor favoured a rival tribe, corrupt officials provided no services or their families needed money”. Since 2002, attacks on the occupation forces have tripled in the provinces surrounding Kabul and increased 11 times in the three most volatile provinces—Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan.

The fighting has engulfed the border regions of Pakistan as well, where Pashtun tribesmen support the struggle against the US occupation and give safe haven to Afghan guerillas, as they did during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Under intense pressure from Washington to root out the insurgents, the government of President Pervez Musharraf has deployed tens of thousands of troops against the tribes, provoking a civil war and fueling the intense domestic opposition to his collaboration with the Bush administration.

The White House and NATO governments with troops in Afghanistan would have taken little comfort from a council or *jirga* held in Kabul from August 9 to 12. Attended by 650 Afghan and Pakistani delegates, and addressed on Sunday by Musharraf and Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the *jirga* was ostensibly aimed at rallying opposition in both countries to the Taliban and “terrorism”.

A Pakistani tribal leader who participated, however, Malik Fazal Manaana Mohammad, insisted on the legitimacy of the anti-NATO insurgency. He told the conference: “Pakistan had helped Afghanistan battle the invading Soviets in a jihad, but Kabul has now brought in a new foreign force. How can I accept that yesterday jihad against the Russians was a must, and today this is not a jihad?” Leaders from the Pakistani Pashtun border region refused to attend at all.

While the escalating war in Afghanistan attracts far less coverage than fighting in Iraq, the neo-colonial occupation of the country has created a disaster for the Afghani people and a quagmire for US and NATO troops that will only continue to deepen.



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