British Army facing worsening situation in Afghanistan

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The debacle suffered by Britain in Iraq has united government spokesmen, its critics in Parliament and military figures in depicting Afghanistan as the "winnable war." In reality, Britain is facing a deteriorating situation on both military fronts, and the calls for a shift of British troops to the Afghan theatre are intensifying conflict there.

On August 15, Defence Secretary Des Browne gave an interview to the *Guardian* in which he said that British forces could be at a "turning point" in bringing stability to Afghanistan while suggesting that there would still be a substantial UK military presence in the country for many years to come. Ratcheting up the pressure on Tehran, he also stated that he had "no doubt" that the Taliban was being supplied with weapons from Iran, via drug routes, and that he had "reason to believe the Taliban go to Tehran for training."

Browne, who recently returned from his fourth visit to Afghanistan since he was appointed 14 months ago, was particularly keen to paint a rosy picture of the UK deployment, given the recent fighting involving British troops in southern Afghanistan.

Seven British soldiers had been killed in Helmand province in a previous 10-day period. Separately, a Briton working for the private security firm ArmorGroup was shot dead in Kabul.

But even these figures do little to encapsulate the deeper crisis that is afoot within the British armed forces.

On July 23, a secret memorandum to fellow defence chiefs by General Sir Richard Dannatt, the head of the British Army, was leaked to the *Daily Telegraph.* Dannatt said, "We now have almost no capability to react to the unexpected." Reinforcements for emergencies or for operations in Iraq or Afghanistan were "now almost non-existent."

"The enduring nature and scale of current operations continues to stretch people," he continued, warning that the army had to "augment" 2,500 troops from other units for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to bring up the total force to the 13,000 needed there. This remained "far higher than we ever assumed."

"When this is combined with the effects of under-manning (principally in the infantry and Royal Artillery) and the pace of training support needed to prepare units for operations, the tempo of life in the Field Army is intense."

While he reassured his fellow defence chiefs that the current situation was "manageable," Dannatt was "concerned about the longer term implications of the impact of this level of operations on our people, equipment and future operational capability."

According to Dannatt's memo, Britain's other rapid deployment unit, the Airborne Task Force, made up mainly of the Parachute regiment, was unable to fully deploy "due to shortages in manpower, equipment and stocks."

As the army has been forced to call up 600 reservists for Afghanistan there is apparently only one Spearhead battalion of 500 troops available for an emergency.

An unnamed senior officer said, "General Dannatt's appraisal means that we are unable to intervene if there is an emergency in Britain or elsewhere, that's self-evident.

"But this is a direct result of the decision to go into Afghanistan on the assumption that Iraq would diminish simultaneously. We are now reaping the reward of that assumption."

The latest warnings by the head of the military also come in the wake of a particularly deadly period for British soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. So far this

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year, 36 soldiers have died in Iraq, bringing the total killed since the March 2003 invasion to 163. The death toll of UK troops in Afghanistan also spiked recently, bringing the total killed to 70 since the 2001 invasion.

A July 17 piece in the *Telegraph* reported that the rate at which British soldiers are being seriously injured or killed on the front line in Afghanistan is projected to exceed that suffered by British troops during World War II. But there are concerns that the official figures given by the Ministry of Defence do not accurately reflect the true injury rate in the way US figures do.

According to the paper, which drew from the findings of the Royal Statistical Society, the casualty rate in the most dangerous regions of the country is approaching 10 percent. (The official injury rate given by the MoD among the 7,000 British troops in Afghanistan is around 3 percent, but when the figures are applied to the three infantry battalions on the front line, it rises to almost 10 percent.) The casualty rate in World War II was 11 percent.

Again, according to the *Telegraph*, whereas in November 2006 only three British soldiers were recorded as wounded in Afghanistan, in May 2007 this rose to 38. In Iraq, in one five-month period this year, there were 23 fatalities among the 5,500 British troops compared with 463 fatalities among the 165,000 US troops.

The paper said, "Military commanders are concerned that the high rate will start to have an impact on operations and morale."

The majority of the wounded are front-line soldiers, who are more experienced in fighting the Taliban and insurgent forces. This leaves front-line battalions reliant on soldiers coming straight from basic training as they turn 18 years of age. At least 30 will deploy to the Royal Anglian Regiment in Helmand within the next month, but this will not be enough to replace those being lost.

The paper concluded, "With more fighting expected during the summer, officers are bracing themselves for the figure to double in the last three months of their tour, meaning that the battalion could be without an entire combat company."

As damning as these findings are of the current state of British armed forces, it seems that they too understate the facts. On August 19, the *Observer* newspaper reported, "In a graphic illustration of the intensity of the conflict in Helmand province, more than 700 battlefield soldiers have needed treatment since April—nearly half of the 1,500 on the front line. The figures, obtained from senior military sources, have never been released by the government, which has faced criticism that it has covered up the true extent of injuries sustained during the conflict."

An army spokesman said official casualty figures between April and the start of August only recorded 204 cases. This is because the MoD only releases figures for the number of soldiers taken to hospital, which is a fraction of those who require treatment on the battlefield. The new figures relate to the number of soldiers "patched up and sent back to the front line" that do not appear in any official casualty reports. By contrast, US official figures include soldiers treated on the front line, and those away from the front line for 72 hours or more.

The *Observer* referred to one British Army official who said that the 700 casualties include a "handful" of officers who suffered injuries and chose to carry on fighting. The injuries can include shrapnel wounds, cuts, burns, and acute heat stroke, as well as diarrhea and vomiting, that can incapacitate a soldier for days. Of the 700 cases, 400 combat troops were described as being so ill they were forced to "lay down their bayonets."

The number of serious injuries sustained by UK troops is also on the rise. A spokesman for the British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association said recently that 27 British soldiers had lost limbs serving in Afghanistan and Iraq during the past 12 months.

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