

Labor expected to send more troops as Australian casualties grow in Afghanistan

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Private Luke Worsley, a 26-year-old from Sydney's outer suburbs, became the third Australian soldier to be killed in combat in Afghanistan in just six weeks when he was shot on November 22 in the southern province of Uruzgan. Trooper David Pearce was killed on October 8 by a roadside bomb and Sergeant Matthew Locke was killed on October 25 by small arms fire. The only other Australian combat fatality in Afghanistan was in February 2002, when a roadside bomb killed Sergeant Andrew Russell.

The sharp rise in deaths is due to growing resistance to the US-led occupation. Australian, Dutch and US-backed Afghan government troops in Uruzgan province are clashing with a large and capable guerilla force of tribesmen and supporters of the former Taliban regime in hills and valleys just 100 kilometres to the east of the military bases near Tarin Kowt, the provincial capital.

The intensified fighting in Uruzgan parallels the situation across much of southern Afghanistan. Far more US and allied troops have been killed in 2007—221 so far—than any other year since the October 2001 invasion.

Worsley died in the opening minutes of an Australian special forces' attack on a compound, allegedly used by guerrillas to assemble roadside bombs. Australian commander Air Chief Marshall Angus Houston told journalists: "The outcome of this fight was very good from our point of view in that we killed a lot of them. We came out on top. We have a large number of detainees. Regrettably, we lost Private Worsley in the process."

The European-based security think tank Senlis—which supports the occupation but is critical of how it is being conducted—issued a report this month pointing to the growing support for the anti-occupation armed resistance. It dismissed the propaganda that the

resistance is made up primarily of "terrorists" and Taliban Islamic extremists. The think tank described a "large, poverty-driven 'grassroots' insurgency" of Afghans motivated by a range of factors, including the perception that the Karzai government in Kabul is nothing more than a US puppet regime, and the failure of the US invasion to deliver promised improvements in living standards, economic development and infrastructure.

According to the report, an estimated 30 percent of the population suffers serious malnutrition, eating less than the minimum daily dietary energy intake. At least 7 percent of children under the age of five die from starvation, whilst 54 percent have stunted growth. Under the US occupation, millions of farmers have been left with no alternative to growing opium in order to survive. Afghanistan now grows a staggering 8,200 tonnes of opium annually, leading to a flood of cheap heroin onto the world's streets. At least three million Afghans are completely dependent on opium production, while an estimated one third of the country's entire gross domestic product is directly or indirectly associated with the drug trade.

Efforts by the Afghan government to appear to curb opium production by destroying some crops have only fueled the resistance. Farmers whose fields are eradicated are given next to no compensation or assistance. The number of civilian casualties caused by occupation forces during counter-insurgency operations has also deepened the hatred of the occupation. The attack by Australian troops on November 22, for example, killed at least two women and a young child.

In summary, Senlis documented why millions of Afghans do not want foreign military forces in their country and are prepared to fight and die to drive them out. Its findings have been supported by US

intelligence officials who told the *Washington Post* last week that the insurgency was gaining strength despite suffering major losses at the hands of the occupation forces.

Senlis estimated that at least 54 percent of the country is already under the control of Taliban-linked forces and that their support is growing. The insurgency also effectively controls the border region of Pakistan, where Pashtun tribesmen are fighting the Pakistani government over its support for the US occupation of Afghanistan. The border region serves as a safe haven for Afghan guerillas, providing them areas to re-equip, train and recruit. The Senlis report concluded: “The question now appears to be not if the Taliban will return to Kabul [Afghanistan’s capital and the headquarters of the occupation], but when this will happen and in what form.”

Like the Soviet army in the 1980s, the US military and allied forces face the prospect of steadily increasing casualties until they leave in defeat. Nearly two years ago, the British Defence ministry advised its government that even if the occupation forces could crush the resistance in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, it would require large numbers of troops for at least the next 15 to 20 years. The latest Senlis report has the same message. It called for the immediate doubling of the US/NATO occupation force to well over 80,000. Among the countries it named as potential sources for additional troops was Australia.

The election of Kevin Rudd and the Australian Labor Party last weekend will only have raised expectations in the US and Europe. Labor defence spokesman Joel Fitzgibbon, who was nominated as the new defence minister this week, stated on November 11: “We are favourably predisposed to any request to increase our commitment to Afghanistan.” It is quite possible that the Australian combat unit that Rudd has pledged to withdraw from southern Iraq sometime next year will simply be redeployed to the more volatile and dangerous environment of Uruzgan province.

Labor has never had anything more than tactical disagreements with the foreign policy of the outgoing Liberal government of John Howard. Both parties are firmly wedded to the US alliance as the means for securing Washington’s support of Australian economic and security interests in the Asian Pacific region. Labor did not oppose the 2003 invasion of Iraq on principle

but on the grounds that it did not have formal UN approval. While it plans to pull combat troops from southern Iraq, Labor does not oppose the ongoing US occupation of the country and more than a thousand military personnel will remain in the Middle East.

In opting to focus on Afghanistan as the means of paying its dues to the US alliance, the Australian Labor government will follow in the footsteps of its British counterpart. The Blair/Brown government has steadily reduced troop levels from the deeply unpopular war in Iraq—while not withdrawing completely—and boosted numbers in Afghanistan.

Labor tries to paint the occupation of Afghanistan as a justified response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The truth is that the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are both part of broader US plans to secure economic and strategic dominance throughout the resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. The invasion of Afghanistan gave the US military bases literally on the doorstep of Russia, China and Iran—three rivals and potential targets.

The ones paying the price for the mercenary calculations of the Australian political establishment are the soldiers who will be killed and wounded in Afghanistan, and the Afghan people they kill and maim.

The Australian casualties already have considerable historical significance. While the number of fatalities is low relative to those suffered in earlier conflicts or those being suffered by the US forces in Iraq, the death toll in Afghanistan is the highest in a war zone since the Vietnam War.

As it did 35 years ago, the deaths of Australian soldiers in a neo-colonial operation will only further fuel political opposition to the war, directed this time at a Labor government.



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