

US prepares to increase occupation forces in Afghanistan

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The Bush administration is preparing to significantly increase US troop levels in Afghanistan in an attempt to quell growing popular hostility to the US and NATO occupying forces. It is doing so with full confidence that it will face no significant opposition from the Democratic-controlled Congress.

On the contrary, much of the criticism from leading Democrats of the administration's conduct of the war in Iraq has been based on the charge that the US preoccupation with Iraq has diverted troops and resources from what they claim is the real center of the "war on terror"—namely, Afghanistan. Leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination such as Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have pledged, if elected, to increase US troop levels in Afghanistan.

The entire American political establishment supports an indefinite US presence in the country, which occupies a critical geo-strategic position bordering Iran and Pakistan.

These preparations were underscored at a press conference held December 21 by Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Joint Chiefs of Staff General James Cartwright. Gates insisted, "NATO's efforts to rebuild and secure [Afghanistan] must be sustained and expanded into next year and beyond." He indicated that about 7,500 more troops were needed to bolster the occupation.

There are currently about 26,000 US soldiers in Afghanistan, 12,000 of whom operate independently and 14,000 of whom are part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The NATO force, which consists of 40,000 personnel, includes soldiers from Canada, Australia, Britain, Germany, France, and other European countries.

In its report on the news conference, the *Wall Street*

Journal noted, "A senior Pentagon official said sending additional US troops to Afghanistan was 'clearly something that is being strongly considered.' He said it likely would be several months before any new forces were deployed, given the military's manpower strains because of the Iraq war."

There have been growing concerns within the US military and the ruling elite as a whole that the situation in Afghanistan is spiraling out of control. Any partial drawdown of US troops from Iraq in the coming months, as the tours of duty of troops sent there as part of Bush's "surge" come to an end, will likely be accompanied by an escalation of the US presence in Afghanistan.

The US is also looking for ways to increase the size of its military to confront a severe shortage of soldiers resulting from the simultaneous colonial-style operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, the Bush administration has by no means ruled out military action against Iran.

According to a *New York Times* article on December 16, the Bush administration is "deeply concerned about the prospect of failure in Afghanistan" and has initiated three separate reviews to develop a new strategy. If these reviews do not lead to a "surge" on the same level as the increase in US forces in Iraq earlier this year, the *Times* noted, this is "mostly because there are no American troops readily available."

A United Nations report published earlier this year found that 2007 was the most violent year in Afghanistan since the invasion in 2001. The violent incidents tabulated by the UN did not include casualties of US and NATO military operations.

Though there is no official calculation of this latter figure, air strikes against towns and presumed Taliban targets were up sharply this year. Earlier this month,

NATO troops recaptured the city of Musa Qala in the south after a protracted operation. The town was controlled by Taliban forces for 10 months.

Gates said at his press conference that the increase in violence in Afghanistan was due in part to “much more aggressive actions on the part of the NATO alliance and the US forces that are there.”

The growth of opposition to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan has been brought on by an escalating social crisis in the country. A December 17 article in the *Washington Post* noted, “Administration officials say the White House has become more concerned in recent months about the situation in Afghanistan, where grinding poverty, rampant corruption, poor infrastructure and the growing challenge from the Taliban are hindering US stabilization efforts. Senior administration officials now believe Afghanistan may pose a greater longer-term challenge than Iraq.”

Gates alluded to Democratic support for increased US troop levels in Afghanistan in his press conference. Asked if he thought sending troops returning from Iraq to Afghanistan would cause political problems for the administration, he replied, “I don’t think there’s a political constraint.”

In addition to increasing its own presence in Afghanistan, the US is also pressing other members of the NATO coalition to increase the size of their forces and remove restrictions on the type of operations these forces are allowed to engage in. At a NATO meeting earlier this month, Gates criticized European powers for not doing enough to aid the occupation in Afghanistan.

At his press conference, Gates’s tone was less confrontational, and he acknowledged that many of the governments participating in the ISAF confront a hostile population at home. Gates said that the US must find ways to “help the European governments perhaps persuade their people of the value and importance of the mission in Afghanistan.” He suggested that it was necessary to “look for more creative ways in which the allies can be helpful.”

Other comments have been more critical. Democratic Representative Joe Sestak, a retired admiral and former staff member of the National Security Council, complained earlier this month, “The Germans, the Spanish, the Italians don’t send any troops to the south except for 250 troops by Germany.” He said that some of the countries “refuse to do combat ops at night and

some don’t fly when the first snowflake falls.”

In an apparent response to this pressure, French President Nicolas Sarkozy made a surprise trip to Afghanistan on Saturday, where he announced that France might increase the number of its soldiers in the country. There are currently some 1,100 French troops in Afghanistan. Sarkozy has sought to align French foreign policy closer to that of Washington, and has backed the Bush administration’s threats and provocations against Iran.

The British Labour government of Gordon Brown is widely expected to increase its forces as well, which are currently at 7,800. Australia’s new prime minister, Kevin Rudd of the Labor Party, was in Afghanistan over the weekend, pledging continued support for the US-backed government of Hamid Karzai.



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