

# Bush orders “mini-surge” of US troops to Afghanistan

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The Bush administration announced on Tuesday that it is sending an additional 3,200 marines to Afghanistan over the coming months, amid growing concerns over the extent and endurance of Afghan resistance to the US-NATO occupation of the country. The deployment is essentially a small-scale version of the Iraq “surge” in the first half of 2007.

A 2,200-strong Marine Expeditionary Force will operate for seven months in the volatile province of Helmand, to temporarily reinforce British forces seeking to suppress the ongoing insurgency by various ethnic Pashtun tribes. The Helmand contingent will operate under the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Some 40,000 troops—drawn from the US, 25 members of NATO and 13 non-NATO countries—make up ISAF and are responsible for security across most of the country’s western, central and southern provinces.

The heaviest fighting, involving US, British, Canadian, Dutch and Australian troops, is in the southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan. Major NATO countries such as Germany, France and Italy have placed strict limits of the deployment of their troops, restricting them mainly to relatively safer areas of the country—the capital Kabul and western provinces such as Herat.

Some 12,000 American troops operate independently from ISAF, under the auspices of the US “Operation Enduring Freedom”, in the rugged terrain of Afghanistan’s eastern provinces along the Pakistani border. A further 1,000 marines will be added to this force, primarily to train Afghan army and police recruits.

The reinforcements are intended to partially meet the request of NATO military commanders for at least another 7,500 troops. Some of the bitterest fighting of the war occurred last year, with the occupation forces suffering their highest casualties since the 2001 invasion. A total of 117 American and 115 ISAF troops were killed during 2007, with hundreds more wounded. The number

of insurgent attacks against foreign and Afghan forces increased by 27 percent overall and 60 percent in Helmand.

The US and NATO soldiers are stretched to breaking point trying to police a territory as large as Iraq, with less than a quarter of the number of troops. They have been unable to prevent cross-border movements by guerillas back and forth from the Pashtun tribal region of Pakistan. The foreign troops control only the immediate vicinity around their heavily-fortified bases.

A report prepared in December for a Canadian parliamentary committee by the Brussels-based think tank Senlis bluntly began: “The Taliban insurgency now controls vast swathes of unchallenged territory including rural areas, border areas, some district centres, and important road arteries. The security situation is such that military convoys are only able to operate in the surroundings of towns and military bases. Humanitarian aid is functionally nonexistent.”

Two maps in the Senlis report identify virtually all southern Afghanistan and Pakistan’s tribal frontier provinces as “Taliban-control or security threat” or “areas with permanent Taliban presence”.

Another report prepared for the same Canadian committee by the US-based Rand Corporation estimated that insurgent attacks increased by 400 percent from 2002 to 2006. Its author Seth Jones noted: “As one senior NATO official told me, NATO and Afghan forces control at most 20 percent of southern Afghanistan. The rest is controlled by Taliban or a range of sub-state groups.”

Jones commented: “What explains the insurgency in Afghanistan that now engulfs roughly half the country? ‘The answer is simple’, one senior Afghan government official told me in October 2007. ‘The people are losing faith in the government. Our security forces cannot protect local villages and our institutions struggle to deliver basic services’.” Life expectancy and literacy

have fallen. Malnutrition and unemployment have increased.

Senlis has repeatedly called for a major increase in troop numbers to at least 80,000, combined with a large increase in relief operations to buy off the resistance. It has particularly highlighted the problem of opium production in the country. With no alternative income, thousands of Afghan peasant farmers are growing opium in the largest quantities in history.

Last year, it is estimated that Helmand province alone produced over 4,300 tonnes of poppy. Nationally, total production is estimated to have been close to 9,000 tonnes, tying up over 193,000 hectares of productive land. Local warlords with links to international drug cartels purchase the opium and process it into heroin. Europe, the Middle East and Africa are being flooded with cheap supplies of the narcotic.

Senlis has secured the backing of the European parliament for a scheme to purchase the opium and process it into morphine. The plan, however, has not received the support of the Bush administration or the British government, which insist on “poppy eradication”—in other words, destroying farmers’ crops. Senlis and other analysts have warned that such tactics will only further fuel anti-occupation sentiment.

With the security situation continuing to deteriorate, the Bush administration has been forced to boost American troop numbers by the dogged refusal of Germany, France and Italy to lift the caveats on their military forces or to send additional soldiers. Both the US and Britain lack the available forces to deploy large-scale reinforcements. The new Labor government in Australia is under pressure from Washington to commit more troops, but has few to send.

After more than six years of fighting, the war has no end in sight. British Defence Secretary Des Browne commented this month that the British military deployment in Afghanistan “is a commitment that could last for decades, although it will reduce over time”.

Divisions within NATO over Afghanistan are clearly evident between the US and European powers. Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morell told a press conference on Tuesday that the US hoped its European allies “would take a serious look at back-filling this deployment after the Marines leave at the end of this year”. Duncan Hunter, the leading Republican on the Houses Armed Services Committee, declared: “In the eyes of Congress, it is unacceptable that the United States must continue to dig deeper into its military force when some of our NATO

allies are unwilling to fulfill or make robust commitments to the international effort in Afghanistan.”

The lack of sufficient ground forces to control territory has led the US/NATO occupation to ever-greater reliance on air strikes to try and stem the insurgency. According to the January 18 *Washington Post*, the number of air strikes carried out in Afghanistan doubled in 2007 to a staggering 3,572—an average of close to 10 per day. In 2005, by comparison, there were around 200 air strikes.

Invariably, air strikes against so-called Taliban—a cynical catchall for any anti-occupation militia—inflict civilian casualties. There are no precise figures. The *Washington Post* cited the estimate of human rights groups that at least 300 Afghan civilians were killed last year by US-NATO bombing operations. The true number is likely to be far higher.

The Senlis report warned last month: “Increased incidents involving civilian casualties, primarily in bombing raids, have predictably proven to be detrimental in winning the support and trust of the Afghan people... We must adopt a policy of zero civilian casualties. Air strikes must be limited to those instances where the objective is well defined and civilians will not be victimised.”

There is little chance such advice will be heeded. The Bush administration has failed to bully its European allies into sending the forces needed to stamp out the Afghan insurgency. Its own military is preoccupied with the occupation of Iraq and preparations for a potential war with Iran. At the same time, the US is not prepared to give up its strategic footprint in Central Asia, embodied in the huge air base at Bagram in the northern Afghanistan—one of the primary motives for the 2001 invasion.



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