

Attacks announce insurgent “spring offensive” in Afghanistan

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A string of attacks against NATO forces and their local collaborators in Afghanistan signals the beginnings of the annual upsurge in fighting as the harsh winter gives way to better climatic conditions for organising guerilla operations.

Two British soldiers have been killed this week by roadside bombs in the volatile province of Helmand, where over 7,000 British troops are attempting to suppress an ongoing insurgency by supporters of the former Taliban regime and ethnic Pashtun tribes. Corporal Damian Mulvihill of the Royal Marines was killed on Wednesday while on a patrol near the town of Sangin. On Sunday, Corporal Damian Lawrence of the Yorkshire Regiment was killed while on a foot patrol near Kajaki.

Kandahar province—the heartland of the Taliban movement and one of the centres of the insurgency—has been hit by a string of bombings this week.

Last Sunday, a suicide bomber detonated a massive explosive among a 500-strong crowd watching a dog fight near Kandahar city. Among the estimated 100 dead were a prominent pro-occupation warlord and police chief, Abdul Hakim Jan, and scores of his armed followers. The casualties are the largest number inflicted by a single suicide bombing since the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001.

The Taliban denied any involvement in the attack but there is little doubt it was carried out by an individual who sympathised with both its Islamic fundamentalist perspective and its resistance to NATO and the US puppet government headed by President Hamid Karzai. Dog fighting was banned as un-Islamic under the Taliban regime. According to Al Jazeera, it has become popular again in the areas where the occupation exerts control.

On Monday, a Taliban supporter carried out a car-

delivered suicide attack on Canadian troops near the town of Spin Boldak, on the Afghan-Pakistan border. The Canadian government has deployed 2,500 troops to Kandahar as part of the 40,000-strong NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which is occupying Afghanistan on behalf of the Bush administration.

The bomber detonated his car close to a convoy of armoured vehicles as it drove past a market of small shops and roadside vendors. Four Canadian soldiers suffered minor injuries. As many as 35 shopkeepers and shoppers were killed. The governor of Kandahar, shaken by the consecutive attacks, issued an unusual public criticism of NATO forces. He blamed Canadian military commanders for the deaths, declaring that he had warned them five times not to conduct operations in Spin Boldak as it was known a Taliban suicide bomber was in the town.

On Tuesday, a third explosion struck the province. What is believed to have been a remotely-detonated roadside bomb went off as a police car went by in a suburb of Kandahar city. While the government police escaped unharmed, at least one bystander was killed and three others wounded.

Insurgents have also struck NATO targets over the past weeks in the capital Kabul and northern Afghan provinces, demonstrating their ability to operate in wider areas of the country.

On Tuesday, five rockets were fired at German troops occupying an airport near the city of Kunduz, in Kunduz province. No casualties were suffered. Some 3,200 German troops are taking part in the occupation. On February 13, Italian soldier Giovanni Pezzulo was shot dead to the east of the capital Kabul. Pezzulo was the first fatality this year among the 2,200 Italian troops in Afghanistan.

A BBC report at the beginning of February provided an insight into the ability of anti-occupation guerillas to freely operate in rural areas within 100 kilometres of central Kabul. A reporting team in the neighbouring province of Wardak filmed and interviewed Taliban as they test-fired their weapons in broad daylight. Their commander, Mullah Rashid Akhond, boasted that he had 2,000 fighters under his command in Wardak alone.

Thousands of Taliban guerillas will soon be able to move down from their mountain safe havens in Pakistan to extend operations against the NATO occupation. The heaviest fighting is likely to take place in Helmand, Kandahar and the neighbouring province of Uruzgan—where Dutch and Australian troops make up the bulk of the ISAF forces.

The Australian Labor government, which is under considerable US pressure to send more troops, announced this week that it was assembling a new 70-man team of trainers which it intends to “embed” as the command of a 600-strong Afghan army battalion and hurl into the expected combat in Uruzgan. The head of the Australian Defence Forces, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, told a parliamentary committee that the plan “would somewhat increase the risk” of Australian casualties. Over 1,000 Australian troops are in Afghanistan but most—apart from Special Air Service (SAS) and commando units—are not involved in combat operations.

The major motivation for the Taliban to conduct an offensive this spring is the open recriminations and divisions within NATO over the failure of more than six years of fighting to suppress the resistance. What was supposed to be a short, relatively tranquil occupation which could be presented domestically as a “peace-keeping” operation has instead been exposed as a brutal counter-insurgency war against a guerilla movement that enjoys considerable sympathy among the Afghan people.

Giving vent to the demoralisation among NATO members, the Norwegian defence minister declared this week that ISAF would have to stay until at least 2015, as it would take that long before an Afghan government army could be assembled that was capable of taking over anti-Taliban operations. Her comments were echoed by the ISAF commander, American Major General David Rodriguez, who told journalists on

Tuesday that “we definitely think it will take a few years” to defeat the Taliban.

This discussion is occurring under conditions where opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan is already high across Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States. The Canadian government has already attempted to appease antiwar sentiment by announcing this week that all its troops will be withdrawn by the end of 2011 regardless of the situation on the ground.

The aim of the Taliban’s spring offensive will be to inflict as many casualties as possible on the Canadian, European and Australian contingents in the hope that it will increase political pressure for an even more rapid withdrawal. A key NATO summit is scheduled to take place in Bucharest in April, where the member-states will be asked for ongoing commitments of forces and additional troops.

With close to half the available American military combat forces bogged down in the occupation of Iraq, the calculation of the Taliban leadership is that if NATO’s participation in the Afghan war collapses, there will be no US troops available to replace them. The American forces would therefore be pulled out as well and Karzai’s US-backed government would collapse within a matter of weeks or months.



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