

US offensive displaces thousands of civilians in Afghanistan

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A major US offensive targeting alleged Taliban guerillas around the city of Garmser in the southern province of Helmand has displaced over 4,000 families, according to the provincial governor Gulab Mangal. He told UN relief agencies that most are living in squalid conditions on the outskirts of the provincial capital, Lashkargah, and had not received any food or non-food assistance.

Ahmad Shah, a 43-year-old peasant farmer, told the IRIN newsagency on the weekend: “Now my family and I live almost 10 kilometres from Lashkargah city. I have made a shelter from blanket pieces to live under, in an open area. I left my home with four children and my wife three weeks ago because of fighting. Now I need a tent, I need food. My children may die under the hot burning sun of Lashkargah.”

A representative of the Afghanistan Red Crescent Society, Asadullah Mayar, told IRIN: “I met families in the outskirts of Lashkargah city who had not had food in days, lying under the trees and in the sun in that hot weather in Helmand.”

Mahboob Garmsiri, a member of the Afghan parliament from Helmand, told a press conference in Kabul that US troops were smashing into houses and arbitrarily detaining people. He also alleged that civilians had been killed and wounded by American air strikes and bombardments.

The *Frontier Post* reported the claims of another Helmand politician, Muhmamand Anwar, who asserted that the number of families displaced was at least 10,000. Muhammad Akhunzada, the head of the Afghan parliamentary committee for internal security, told journalists that the “harsh treatment” of civilians by US troops was “causing further alienation of the population” and had already led “more areas to fall into the hands of the Taliban”.

The US military denies that the Garmser offensive has forced civilians from their homes. The operation, however, is unfolding under a blanket of censorship and secrecy. There have been no reports on the number of alleged Taliban who have been killed or detained, let alone on civilian casualties.

The offensive in the Garmser area, which is one of the main assembly and transit points for Taliban militants coming down from mountain bases along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, is among the largest conducted by US or NATO forces in Afghanistan for several years. It involves the entire 2,300-strong US Marine Expeditionary Unit that was sent to Afghanistan in March to reinforce the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Marine Colonel Pete Petronzio told Canadian reporters on the weekend that the fighting over the past several weeks had been the heaviest of the operation. He explained Garmser was “an incredibly tough place to be”. He said there had been frequent firefights with insurgents, and encounters with roadside bombs and other booby traps. Dozens of air strikes had been called in against alleged guerilla positions.

The outgoing NATO commander in Afghanistan, US General Dan McNeill, told journalists on Monday that “insurgents, after experiencing these several weeks of pressure below Garmser, are trying to flee to the south perhaps to go back to sanctuaries in another country”—meaning Pakistan.

Coinciding with the operation in Helmand, US and NATO troops have launched offensives in other parts of the country against the armed resistance to the occupation forces and the US-backed Afghan puppet government. These operations, however, have the character of rearguard actions aimed at containing an expanding insurgency that enjoys considerable popular

support.

Canadian troops launched an offensive called “Rolling Thunder” in late May in several districts of Kandahar province where there is strong local support for the Taliban movement. A Canadian officer told journalists that the operation had “disrupted” Taliban cells in Zhari district, which were manufacturing roadside bombs.

The *Globe and Mail*’s description of the NATO attack on the Zhari town of Pashmul on May 27 makes clear that civilians have been forced from their homes by the Canadian operations as well.

The newspaper reported: “By 6:15 am, bullets were already ripping through Pashmul, a collection of small, ancient villages and farmland. The few locals still living in the area either fled by foot or hunkered down in their compounds before the fighting began. Most are poor farmers.” The battle with insurgents ended “after the Canadians called on US military air support to drop several bombs, including Hellfire missiles, on the area”.

Afghan police claimed that American air strikes in the district killed a regional Taliban leader, Mullah Tohr Agha, and as many as 15 other guerillas. There were no reports on civilian casualties.

On Monday, three Canadian troops and an Afghan interpreter were wounded by a roadside bomb while on a foot patrol in Zhari. Another Canadian was wounded by small arms fire. A Canadian military spokesman, Lieutenant Al Blondin, told journalists: “We have come to expect retaliation from insurgents following their setbacks.” Nine Canadian troops have been killed this year in Kandahar province.

In the neighbouring province of Uruzgan, Australian special forces and commandos launched an offensive last week to cut off an alleged Taliban supply routes from Helmand to other areas such as the capital Kabul. An Australian military press release noted: “This is an area of huge tactical and strategic significance for the Taliban extremists.”

More than six years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and despite the deaths of tens of thousands of guerillas, the anti-occupation insurgency is, if anything, extending its reach beyond the southern provinces like Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan. The occupation force of some 60,000 troops is incapable of securing more than the main cities and towns, allowing

the Taliban and other resistance groups to move largely unchecked in rural areas.

The Afghan interior ministry claimed on the weekend that a three-day operation had to be conducted in the western province of Farah, which borders Iran, to seize back control of two districts from the Taliban. It reportedly resulted in the death of more than 100 insurgents.

The governor of the north-western province of Badghis reported that a combination of US air strikes and ground assaults last week had killed more than 55 of a Taliban force that had attacked two police stations. As many as 400 guerillas were reportedly involved.

An operation also had to be launched last Friday to take back control of the Rashidan district of Ghanzi province, where the district governor reportedly mutinied against the occupation and handed over the area to Taliban insurgents.

In eastern Afghanistan, two American troops were killed on Saturday by a roadside bomb in the city of Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province. Two others were wounded by a bomb in Paktia province, which is also in the east.

According to figures published in a May 29 feature on Afghanistan by German magazine *Speigel*, there were 8,950 attacks on US, NATO and Afghan government forces in 2007—ten times as many as in 2004.



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