Civilian and military deaths at new highs in Afghan war

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Three Afghan men and 19 women and children were slaughtered on Sunday when US aircraft bombed a wedding party in the remote Deh Bala district of Nangarhar province, in the country's east close to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The killings were reported by the district governor and confirmed by survivors who were being treated at a hospital in Jalalabad, the provincial capital. Afghan officials have also reported that as many as 12 civilians were killed by air strikes last Friday in the nearby province of Nuristan province.

Following standard operating procedure, the US military has categorically denied that any civilians were killed during the bombing raid in Nangarhar. Captain Christian Patterson insisted to Agence France Presse that "it was not a wedding party, there were no women and children present". Another spokesman alleged that five to 10 anti-occupation insurgents had been killed.

However, the latest incidents follow the release of a report by John Holmes, the head of United Nations humanitarian affairs operations in Afghanistan, which found that the number of documented civilian deaths has increased by 62 percent this year compared with the first six months of 2007. The agency had recorded a total of 698 civilian fatalities. The UN blamed the actions of US, NATO and Afghan government forces for 255 deaths and anti-occupation insurgents for 422.

The figures are further evidence of the expanding insurgency against the US military and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and the desperate character of the fighting over recent months. More than six years after the US-led invasion in October 2001, the occupation forces have proven incapable of subduing the armed resistance to their presence and are ever more reliant on air strikes to disrupt insurgent activity.

Guerillas loyal to the former Taliban Islamic regime, which was overthrown in 2001, as well as various tribal militias from both Afghanistan and Pakistan, are taking advantage of the summer months to increase operations across the south and east of the country. The number of attacks on US troops in the eastern provinces has increased by 40 percent this year, according to American commander, Major General Jeffrey Schloesser.

More US and NATO troops lost their lives in Afghanistan in June than in any other month since the country was invaded. A total of 45 soldiers were killed, 27 American, 13 British, two Canadian, one Polish, one Romanian and one Hungarian. The death of a US Army specialist Estell Turner on July 2 in a roadside bombing pushed the overall toll for 2008 to 124 and the total number of US/NATO deaths in the Afghan war to 873. More than half the deaths have been caused by roadside bombs.

The fatalities are only one aspect of the cost of the conflict. As of June 28, 2,167 American soldiers had been wounded-in-action in the Afghanistan theatre. As of June 18, the British military had reported 510 wounded-in-action as well as 1,130 non-battle or disease injuries. The number of Canadian wounded is now well over 350.

US President George Bush attempted to put the best possible face on the June casualty statistic. He told journalists that while it had been a "tough month in Afghanistan", it had "also been a tough month for the Taliban". Hundreds of insurgents were reportedly killed, particularly during a NATO/Afghan government offensive to retake the Arghandab Valley. Anti-occupation militants seized the valley in the days following a prison break of over 1,000 Taliban detainees from the Sarposa prison in the nearby city of Kandahar.

However, the most striking feature of the losses inflicted on insurgents in the one-sided battles with heavily armed and armoured US and NATO troops is that they appear to have had little impact on the ability of the Taliban to recruit and deploy replacements. Despite suffering thousands of dead and wounded every year, each spring has seen new detachments of guerillas move down from mountain bases along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to attack the occupation forces on a larger scale.

The June Pentagon report presented to the US Congress on Afghanistan noted: "A principal strength of the Taliban-led Kandahari insurgency is its ability to regenerate combat power by leveraging tribal networks, exploiting lack of governance and the Afghan peoples' inherent resistance to change and outside influence. The Taliban's strategy hinges on their ability to prevent the Afghan government and ISAF from achieving victory, and the international community eventually losing the will to tactically intervene in the counterinsurgency effort. The insurgency's critical capabilities are its ability to project strength and a mystique of the inevitability of Taliban rule that is constantly sustained through a focused information effort; in other words, *not losing is winning*" (emphasis in the original).

In other words, the insurgents have support among the Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan and the frontier provinces of Pakistan. They oppose the US-installed government in Kabul and have an "inherent resistance" to the presence of foreign occupation troops. Just as they fought a guerilla war against the Soviet

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occupation in the 1980s, they will fight the US and NATO forces until they are also forced to withdraw.

Far from weakening as time goes on, the insurgency is strengthening. The Pentagon report revealed that the number of roadside bombings in 2007 increased to 2,615, up from 1,931 in 2006. The number of all "security incidents" increased from 425 per month in 2006 to 525 per month.

The ISAF consists of only 52,700 troops, with another 14,000 American troops operating independently in the eastern provinces. The Afghan army has barely 47,000 troops in uniform. To control a country as large as Afghanistan, US general Dan McNeill estimated earlier this year that a force of at least 400,000 would be needed.

The inability of the US-led forces to control territory allows insurgents to operate relatively freely and attack the occupation's supply lines and weak points. The government police are under constant attack. In 2007 alone, 925 police were reportedly killed. This year, the reports collated by www.icasualties.org show that between 20 and 50 Afghan police were being killed each week. The government forces are essentially besieged in their stations in the main cities and towns and make little attempt to disrupt insurgent activity in rural areas.

A February report by the European think-tank Senlis assessed that "the Taliban are entrenched in the South, running parallel governments in several districts and controlling the majority of secondary roads". Antonio Maria Costa, the head of the United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime, told the BBC this month that the Taliban was able to raise at least $100 million in 2007 from the taxes openly collected from opium farmers across southern Afghanistan.

The US attempt to create a functioning puppet state is also being thwarted by the regular assassination of people collaborating with the occupation. A suicide bomber made a failed attempt to assassinate the governor of Nimroz province, Ghulam Dastagir Azad, on Wednesday. A tribal leader working with Canadian troops in Kandahar province was shot and killed outside his house on June 6.

It is accepted wisdom in US and European military and strategic circles that the pro-US government would disintegrate if the American and NATO forces were withdrawn. The south of the country is under the sway of a resurgent Taliban, the west is controlled by Uzbek strongmen like Abdul Rashid Dostum and the north is divided between various ethnic Tajik warlords. President Hamid Karzai is still contemptuously referred to as nothing more than the "mayor of Kabul".

The Afghan army also provokes contempt. It is incapable of operating without foreign assistance. The US Government Accountability Office made the scathing estimation in June that despite the expenditure of over $10 billion on the Afghan Army, only two of its 105 battalions were capable of operating independently of US and NATO forces. The state of the police is even worse. The GAO found that none of the 433 police units were "fully capable" and only 52 could be deployed even with occupation support. It reported that 87 percent of the police units had problems with corruption and a staggering 94 percent were not being paid on time.

Analysts have assessed that the occupation will need to continue for at least the next 10 years, and in some cases the next 20 years. The Pentagon report did not even try to put a timetable on how long US troops would need to remain, stating only that "success" in Afghanistan would "take time, effort, resources, and the sustained interest and commitment of the international community".

NATO countries, however, are continuing to refuse to deploy the number of combat troops that military commanders are stating are necessary. At the beginning of the year, NATO command made an urgent request that 7,500 troops be sent. They have received barely 4,500, and that figure is primarily due to the deployment of an additional 3,200 US marines.

The marine units that Bush ordered to Afghanistan at the beginning of the year were told this week that their tour-of-duty was being extended. Instead of withdrawing in October, they will stay for at least 30 extra days. The White House has also stated that US troop numbers will be boosted in 2009.

Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, told a press conference on July 2 that none could be sent sooner because he did not have them to send. The surge in Iraq has stretched the US military to breaking point. Additional forces for Afghanistan will only become available as they are withdrawn and rested from tours of duty in the Middle East.

The NATO Supreme Allied Commander of Europe, US General John Craddock, made another appeal this week for NATO countries to send more troops and equipment to Afghanistan. According to Craddock, the occupation force is so deficient in helicopters that it has been forced to lease some from private companies.

Craddock told a recent security conference in Vienna: "Too often the forces there now are relatively fixed because we don't have adequate tactical mobility to move them around, to be able to do the jobs we need for them to do." He declared: "We need more full motion video unmanned aerial vehicles, we need more surveillance aircraft, we need helicopters, medium- and heavy-lift helicopters.... An infantry battalion in Afghanistan without tactical mobility, without intelligence support, surveillance capability, reconnaissance, is very limited."

Attempts are being made to paper over the crisis within NATO by blaming the Pakistani government for failing to prevent Taliban insurgents using its frontier provinces as a safe haven. Sooner or later, however, the obvious divisions between the US and the European powers over who should bear the cost of an indefinite neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan will come to the fore.

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