

Ten dead on Sunday

US/NATO casualties climb in Afghanistan

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The US/NATO occupation force in Afghanistan on Sunday suffered the largest number of casualties in a 24-hour period in more than three years. Nine American troops lost their lives and as many as 15 were wounded in a day-long battle with insurgents who attacked a US base in the eastern province of Kunar. Another soldier, also believed to be an American, was killed in a roadside bombing in the volatile Sangin district of Helmand province.

Sunday's attack was one of the most effective insurgent operations in the six-and-a-half year war. The US military and Afghan government forces had only established a base in Wanat, a village near the Pakistani border, three days earlier. A sizeable force of guerillas converged on the base in the middle of the night. According to an Associated Press report, they evacuated the civilian community and took up firing positions in buildings surrounding the facility. At approximately 4.30 a.m., the insurgents launched an assault.

Fighting lasted throughout the day, with the anti-occupation fighters repeatedly engaging the base with mortars, machine-guns and rocket-propelled grenades. According to some reports, militants managed to get inside the US compound. Multiple US air strikes had to be called in to drive off the attackers.

A spokesman for NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) told journalists: "We defended the base. There are still some operations on-going. The insurgents were repulsed and there is no fighting now, but they might pop up again." NATO sources claim that dozens of insurgents were killed.

Wanat is near the district of Deh Bala, in the adjacent province of Nangahar, where US fighters bombed a wedding party on July 7. As many as 27 men, women and children were slaughtered. The assault on the American base may well have been a revenge attack.

The attack, however, is part of a trend over recent weeks of set piece battles against the occupation forces. In late

June, a large force of guerillas seized a number of villages in the Arghandab Valley to the northwest of Kandahar. Scores were killed during the US/Afghan government operation to take back control of the district.

Anti-occupation fighters also attempted several offensive operations in Sangin last week, crossing the Helmand River to attack NATO and Afghan Army personnel. US retaliatory air strikes on Sunday reportedly resulted in the deaths of at least 40 guerillas, as well as the destruction of several improvised bridges and dozens of small boats.

Also on Sunday, a suicide bomber detonated an explosion at a crowded bazaar in the town of Deh Rawood in Uruzgan province, killing five Afghan police and as many as 19 civilians, including a number of young children. The suicide attack came in the wake of a massive blast that struck the Indian embassy in Kabul, killing 41 people and injuring over 140.

Most US and NATO casualties continue to be the result of remotely-detonated roadside bombs. A total of 20 occupation personnel have already lost their lives in July, including a 42-year-old American junior officer who appears to have committed suicide on July 4.

Among the recent casualties was a Hungarian explosives expert who was killed by a bomb on Saturday in the northern province of Baghlan. The 32-year-old had only arrived in Afghanistan several weeks ago—to replace a Hungarian explosives expert who was killed trying to defuse a bomb on June 10.

A roadside bomb in Paktika province took the lives of two US National Guardsmen from Guam last Thursday. More than 15 percent of all American troops serving in Afghanistan are part-time civilian soldiers.

Nine UK troops were wounded near Sangin on Wednesday when a British helicopter gunship, which had been called in to rescue them from an ambush, mistakenly fired on their position. Three of the men suffered serious injuries. One had to be flown back to Britain for

specialised medical treatment. He is said to be in a stable condition.

An Australian special forces soldier was killed and three others wounded by a roadside bomb in Uruzgan province on Tuesday. This was the fifth Australian fatality in the past nine months. The same day, an American soldier was killed in a bombing near Bagram airport.

The insurgency is based among the fiercely independent Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Afghanistan and Pakistan border. Some guerilla groups are loyal to the fundamentalist Taliban movement that was overthrown by the US invasion in 2001. Others follow Pashtun Islamist warlords such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Huqqani—both of whom received huge amounts of money and arms from the CIA to conduct a guerilla war against the Soviet force occupying Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Fighting has been taking place inside Pakistan over the past several weeks. The Pakistani government, responding to pressure from Washington to curb the movement of guerillas into Afghanistan, has ordered its security forces to crack down on various militant groups operating in the tribal provinces along the Afghan border. The focus of the operations has been the area surrounding Peshawar—the largest city on the road through to the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan.

Insurgents retaliated over the weekend, ambushing a convoy of Pakistani Frontier Corps—the paramilitary force responsible for security in the tribal regions—on Saturday near the border city of Hangu, to the south west of Peshawar. According to Pakistani media sources, eight troops were killed and eight others who were captured were executed by firing squad. Local Taliban groups claimed they had captured and were still holding a further 29 soldiers and police.

The attack coincided with an unannounced visit to Pakistan by US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen. He met with President Pervez Musharraf, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and the head of the armed forces, General Ashfaq Kiyani.

The purpose of Mullen's trip was to deliver a blunt message to the Pakistani establishment to step up operations in the border regions against Pashtun militants. The Bush administration and NATO countries have repeatedly accused Islamabad of not doing enough to stop insurgent activity and thereby facilitating the rise in attacks on their troops in Afghanistan. Mullen repeated the claim on Saturday, telling a press conference that the "border is more porous than it was a year ago. It's very important that action be taken to respond to that."

The Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai has gone further and accused the Pakistani intelligence agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), and sections of its military of assisting the Taliban insurgency. An Afghan government spokesman blamed the ISI for last week's bombing of the Indian embassy. Other Afghan figures have implied it was involved in the assassination attempt on Karzai in June.

Yesterday, Karzai repeated the accusations, declaring: "The murder, killing, destruction, dishonouring and insecurity in Afghanistan is carried out by the intelligence administration of Pakistan, its military intelligence institutions.... We have told the government of Pakistan and the world and from now on it will be pronounced by every member of the Afghan nation."

The implicit threat facing Musharraf and Gilani is that the US military will step up its own operations inside Pakistan's tribal regions unless the situation is brought under control. Just days before Mullen's visit, nine Pakistani troops and several civilians were wounded when a border outpost was bombed in South Waziristan on Thursday. Local tribesmen told the Associated Press that the bombing was a US air strike. The Pakistani government, anxious not to further inflame the mass resentment and hostility over its collaboration with the US, stated that casualties were inflicted by mortars fired from Afghanistan and that the attacker had "yet to be determined".

The escalating war in Afghanistan is fuelling calls for the deployment of additional US troops to the war zone. Significantly, Barack Obama, the Democratic Party presidential candidate, who has supported US military action against insurgent bases inside Pakistan, was among them. He called in an op-ed in yesterday's *New York Times* for the dispatch of an additional two combat brigades, or more than 10,000 troops. "We need more troops, more helicopters, better intelligence gathering and more non-military assistance to accomplish the mission there," he wrote.



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