

Aid agencies issue warning on Afghanistan as US and Britain prepare to escalate military action

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In a statement issued August 1, the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (Acbar) expressed its “grave concern about the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and the serious impact on civilians.”

The umbrella group of 100 aid agencies is now warning that they may become unable to operate in parts of Afghanistan once deemed safe due to the escalating conflict.

The agencies criticised the rising number of civilian deaths, which they said were caused mainly by insurgent attacks—a 50 percent increase compared to last year—but also by NATO/US air strikes—up by around 40 percent from last year.

The month of June saw more attacks on NGOs than in any single month since the US-led invasion of 2001, and some agencies have been forced to drastically scale back operations. According to Acbar, 19 aid workers have been killed so far this year, more than during the whole of 2007.

Matt Waldman, policy adviser at Oxfam International, stressed the crucial character of the aid work for many ordinary Afghans. “Afghanistan is facing a drought,” he told the BBC. “There is also a crisis with respect to food prices, which have gone up dramatically.”

Many schools and clinics have now closed, and people have become internally displaced.

The United Nations (UN) said recently that the humanitarian challenge was growing in Afghanistan, with 12 of its aid convoys attacked by gunmen in the last six months.

UN spokesman Aleem Siddique said, “We need the continued support of NGOs and the international

community if we are to prevent further suffering... It is imperative they remain committed to Afghanistan. The needs of its people cannot be met by the government and the UN alone.”

Acbar claims that around 2,500 Afghans have been killed in the occupation-related violence this year, of which around 1,000 were civilians. According to the groups’ figures, around 260 civilians were killed in July alone, a higher number than any other month in the past six years.

Two thirds of reported civilian casualties, Acbar estimates, could be attributed to insurgent activities, due to the “increasing use of suicide bombings and other indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas and the use of civilian property from which to launch attacks.”

The aid agency body also stressed the growing number of air strikes by foreign military forces, which were contributing to the civilian death toll. In addition, the Acbar statement noted elements of the increasingly brutal occupation, whereby “searches conducted by Afghan and international forces have on some occasions involved excessive use of force, extra-judicial killings, destruction of property and/or mistreatment of suspects.”

The statement by Acbar noted that insecurity had spread to previously secure areas, including parts close to the capital, Kabul. NATO commanders have said violence is up by around 40 percent in eastern Afghanistan since spring this year. This is due directly to NATO/US troops patrolling more areas, particularly along the Afghan-Pakistan border.

The number of foreign troops in Afghanistan has gone up by more than 10,000 in the last year to some 71,000. This is set to rise again dramatically following

political developments in Washington and London around the so-called “Afghan consensus.”

On the back of the disaster in Iraq, and following the failure to coerce any of the other NATO countries to commit further significant troop deployments, the US and Britain are preparing to massively escalate their military presence in Afghanistan, thus considerably inflaming the already volatile situation.

While the US has been recalibrating foreign policy further towards Afghanistan and the central Asian region, similar moves have been taking place within the increasingly embattled British government led by Gordon Brown.

Brown briefed members of parliament July 22 on the refocusing of British military presence away from southern Iraq and more towards southern Afghanistan. Speaking of a “fundamental change of mission” and a move “from combat to ‘overwatch,’ ” Brown said the number of British troops in Iraq will be cut from 4,100 to just a few hundred in around a year. *The Guardian* wrote that the “Commons statement shows government is finally listening to the military planners who warned Iraq was a costly sideshow.”

But just as Obama is now keen to do in the US, Brown has already made it clear that a significant military turn towards Afghanistan does not mean that Britain will be turning its back on the highly profitable areas of occupied Iraq. The *Guardian* noted that the remaining UK military forces in Iraq after 2009 “would include the presence of a number of British troops continuing to train and mentor the Iraqi army. It would also include civilian teams of investment and aid advisers—Britain, as Brown made clear, wants to keep close to Basra and its port, potentially one of the richest areas of the Middle East.

“That is the planning assumption in the Ministry of Defence and elsewhere in Whitehall. It is a timetable and an ambition that ties in with the hopes of the Iraqi and US governments—particularly if Barack Obama wins the American presidency in November.”

The decision to sustain two major military operations has never been popular with the leadership of the British Army. But the pressure is now leading to increasing tensions within and between the military top brass and the political elite. General Dannatt, the Chief of the General Staff, has been outspoken during his two-year tenure, criticising poor pay and accommodation

for soldiers and courting controversy by suggesting that British troops were part of the problem in Iraq.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup also said recently, “Sustaining two theatres at the level we are at the moment is a stretch on us.”

Defence Secretary Des Browne gave a speech on future US/UK deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan to the Brookings Institute in Washington, in which he said that Britain’s Armed Forces need “time and space” to recover from the “stress” of waging two wars on two fronts.

Browne told the Washington think tank that the West will have to remain in Afghanistan for much longer than in Iraq:

“It will be a longer haul in Afghanistan.... Let us acknowledge that this is a long term and challenging enterprise.... We know that in Afghanistan we are engaged in a generational struggle.”

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the British ambassador to Kabul, has suggested Britain will have to retain a presence in Afghanistan for 30 years.

Almost 150 NATO soldiers have died in Afghanistan this year, according to a tally compiled on August 1 by the AFP news agency. US casualties reached a monthly high of the war in June. In July alone, 17 UK troops were killed (114 since the occupation began). As with the death toll for ordinary Afghans and NGOs, the figures for combat soldiers are also set to rise over the coming months.



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