

French troops killed in Afghanistan: another sign of an escalating war

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The death of 10 French soldiers in an ambush in Afghanistan on Monday has again underscored the resurgence of armed resistance against the US-led occupation and reignited debate in France over its involvement in the war. The incident involved the worst loss of foreign troops in open battle since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and, for the French army, its highest casualties since a Beirut truck bomb killed 58 paratroopers in 1983.

According to the official account, the French troops were part of a combined reconnaissance mission with Afghan soldiers and US Special Forces in the district of Sarobi, just 50 kilometres east of Kabul, the Afghan capital. The patrol was forced to stop in the early afternoon as a result of poor road conditions in the mountainous terrain. A group of French soldiers went ahead on foot to reconnoitre and came under fire from three sides.

General Jean-Louis Georgelin told the media that nine French soldiers were killed immediately and the tenth later died when his vehicle overturned. Close air support and reinforcements were called in, but fighting continued well into the night before the survivors were finally airlifted to safety. Another 23 French troops and at least two Afghan soldiers were wounded.

Estimates put the number of insurgents involved at about 100—another sign that the Taliban and other anti-occupation groups are increasingly prepared to confront US and NATO forces in large groups. “What we’ve noticed in recent operations is a greater capacity from the Taliban to organise and manoeuvre and as we saw in this incident, they don’t seem to have any problems securing ammunition,” Georgelin commented.

The French soldiers were from elite units—the 8th Marine Infantry Parachute Regiment, the 2nd Foreign Parachute Regiment and the Regiment de marche du

Tchad, a mechanised marine unit. Earlier this year, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced an increase in the number of French troops in Afghanistan by 700 to 2,600 in response to calls by the Bush administration for extra NATO forces. The clash on Monday almost doubled the French death toll in Afghanistan, which now stands at 24 since 2001.

Sarkozy was quick to express his determination that French troops would remain in Afghanistan, declaring on Tuesday: “France is determined to continue the struggle against terrorism for democracy and freedom. The cause is just.” In a show of support for a continued presence, the president flew to Afghanistan yesterday with French officials to attend a memorial service and hold discussions with military commanders.

Monday’s clash, however, has provoked sharp recriminations in France. Poll after poll has shown a majority of the French population opposed to any military involvement in Afghanistan. Sarkozy’s decision in March to dispatch extra troops was widely opposed at the time, with a BVA poll showing 68 percent opposed and only 15 percent in favour.

Following the latest incident, the *Guardian* reported that “political chat sites and newspaper blogs have been inundated with comments denouncing Sarkozy’s ‘transatlantic drift’, which... has sent young men out to fight a war which has nothing to do with them. ‘Shame on the poodle politics helping the Yanks and their “new world order”, reads one, ‘Our men did not die in the interests of France’.”

Roland Gregoire, an uncle of one of the dead soldiers, told Reuters: “We shouldn’t have sent these young men to go and get killed. What’s certain is that they died in an ambush, like game animals.”

The opposition Socialist Party (PS) has called for an emergency debate in the French National Assembly

over the war in Afghanistan, but has not called for the withdrawal of French troops. An editorial in the leftist *Liberation* asked how it was possible “to win a militarily unwinnable war”.



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