

After 10 soldiers are killed

French government, media scramble to contain opposition to Afghan deployment

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The deaths of 10 French soldiers in Afghanistan on August 18 have precipitated a political crisis in France, as politicians and the media try to contain popular opposition to the French deployment in Afghanistan. This was the largest death toll for the French military since the 1983 bombing of the Beirut barracks, which left 58 French paratroopers dead, and brings the total French death toll in Afghanistan to 24. The deaths have particularly destabilised French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who sent a further 700 French troops to Afghanistan in defiance of widespread opposition in April.

The day after the deaths were announced, Sarkozy, accompanied by Defense Minister Hervé Morin and Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, flew to Kabul to meet with French paratroopers from the unit that was ambushed near Sarobi, about 50 km east of Kabul. Press accounts describe a chilly reception given to Sarkozy by assembled soldiers. *Le Point* wrote: “The French soldiers one by one saluted the head of state, who is also commander-in-chief. Some soldiers exchanged a few words with him, others limited themselves to a handshake. The oppressive silence in the French headquarters at NATO in the Afghan headquarters was only interrupted by the deafening screams of planes landing at the nearby airport.”

Sarkozy told the troops: “I wanted to say to you that the work you are doing here is indispensable. Why are we here? Because what is at stake here is a part of the world’s liberty. This is where the struggle against terrorism is being carried out. I have no doubts we must be here. I was also stunned by what took place. I tell you in good conscience, if I had to do it again, I would.”

Military authorities attempted to clear themselves of any responsibility for the incident. Armed forces chief of staff Jean-Louis Georgelin said, “All the dead and wounded were hit in the first moments” of the ambush, and Defense Minister Hervé Morin said air support arrived within minutes of the ambush.

The official line quickly broke, however, when on August

20 the daily *Le Monde* published a few extracts from interviews with wounded soldiers who had survived the fighting. One soldier told *Le Monde*: “We stayed four hours without reinforcements. We had no more ammunition to defend ourselves with any weapons besides our Famas [assault rifles].” The soldiers added that NATO air support had at times bombed them by mistake, adding to their casualties by “friendly fire.”

Le Monde noted: “The official story seems extremely incomplete compared to the accounts of the French soldiers wounded in the ambush.... Contrary to the official story, the fatalities did not all occur in the initial moments of the fighting, according to the soldiers asked about this matter, but as it went on.”

Top officials’ reaction has been to try to brazen out the revelations about the ambush.

On August 21, a funeral for the 10 soldiers was held at the Court of Honour of the Invalides military complex in Paris, at which Sarkozy posthumously named the soldiers to the Legion of Honour. Sarkozy also crossed himself before the coffins in front of the assembled television cameras—a highly unusual public reference to Catholic tradition for French heads of state. Asked about the reports of friendly fire casualties at the Elysée presidential palace before the Invalides ceremony, however, Sarkozy shot back: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves,” and scolded the journalists for forgetting that now was a time for “bereavement.”

Morin denied that any friendly fire deaths had occurred, and dismissed concerns that reinforcements had arrived too slowly: “Fifteen to 20 minutes after the engagement of forces, a support section left the base camp and arrived at the theater in 40-50 minutes. Then a second section left, then helicopters were engaged.”

To public objections that most of the casualties in the parachute regiment were in fact young recruits with only a few months’ training, Morin replied: “A professional army is of necessity an army of young people.... Our soldiers are

trained for months, are prepared for months before leaving for Afghanistan.”

In a France2 television interview, army chief of staff General Elrick Irastorza dismissed all the soldiers’ claims. He blamed the discrepancy between their accounts and the official timeline on soldiers’ panicking under fire—“The emotional charge that leads each one of us to have his own part of truth, which is quite understandable...when one is under fire, the perception of time is no longer the same.” On the question of the soldiers’ training, he flatly said: “The level of operational preparation corresponded to what we were obligated to give them for this mission.”

The fatalities have unleashed bitter recriminations inside the French political elite, which is highly conscious of the growing resistance inside Afghanistan to foreign occupation, and of the unpopularity of French participation in the Afghan occupation. Even though the Afghan deployment has largely been kept out of the headlines in France, 55 percent of the population supported withdrawal from Afghanistan in a recent poll.

Le Monde accompanied its publication of the soldiers’ interviews with an editorial, “Afghanistan: explaining oneself.” The editorial voiced the misgivings of a substantial section of the French bourgeoisie, who feel that Sarkozy’s foreign policy turn towards the US is too open, and that politicians must try a new tack to bolster public support for the occupation of Afghanistan.

It wrote that French “participation [in the Afghan occupation] has been supported by nearly all political forces and has never been put in question in principle. However, the methods employed in this policy have been discussed.... Paris has demanded a revision of NATO strategy, whose failure is evident. It is time to redefine the Alliance’s objectives and its means of action. The president must explain to France why its soldiers are dying 6,000 kilometers from its territory.”

Pierre Lellouche, member of the ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Majority), took a similarly militarist line. While acknowledging that Afghanistan is “already a quagmire,” he called for a modification of the “civilian-military strategy of NATO.” He also reiterated his support for Sarkozy’s decision to send more French troops into the quagmire in April, and blamed the devastation wrought by the US-led occupation of Afghanistan on the fact that Europeans had not “brought a significant contribution into Afghanistan.”

The bipartisan consensus by the bourgeois right and left in favor of French occupation of Afghanistan dates to its inception, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. At the time, conservative President Jacques Chirac and the Plural Left coalition government led by Prime Minister

Lionel Jospin (encompassing the Socialist Party, French Communist Party and Green Party) all approved France’s initial deployment of troops in support of the US.

At stake are substantial geopolitical and material interests for the French bourgeoisie, which views the Afghan deployment as a chance to step onto the world stage and consolidate close relations with Washington. By placing troops at the heart of an oil-rich and war-torn region, French imperialism is seeking to extend its reach in the Middle East and Central Asia and gain battlefield experience for its army and weapons systems. From the point of view of the French bourgeoisie, the deployment also serves the useful purpose of accustoming the population to having French troops stationed abroad and taking casualties.

This gives the criticisms of the French government’s war policy by fallen soldiers’ families a particularly explosive character. The aunt of one of the fallen soldiers, Yolande Hweillia, emerged from a private meeting between Sarkozy and soldiers’ relatives, saying she was “not at peace” and adding, “Only young people fell, not experienced people.”

In an interview with *Le Parisien*, family and friends of paratrooper Julien Le Pahun, aged 20, expressed their hostility to the occupation. Julien’s younger sister Marine said she “didn’t want to talk to the president or the politicians.”

Le Pahun’s friends said: “The army changed him. The last few months, he was more tense than usual, as if he were being hunted, even when he slept. Soldiers, inevitably, no longer are men—they become weapons. He only thought about the army. He passed the tests without conviction, but when he was admitted to the parachutists, he was so proud that he wanted to go on.”

Julien’s younger brother Aurélien spoke of conversations he had with Julien via a mobile phone Julien had purchased in Kabul: “He wasn’t allowed to say exactly what he was doing. But we understood that essentially it was horrible.”



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