

A bloody month in Afghanistan

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The August death toll of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan reached 45 on Sunday—the equal highest monthly total of the near seven-year war. A Romanian soldier providing protection to a supply convoy was killed when the vehicle he was travelling in drove over a mine that had been planted on the main highway connecting the capital Kabul with the country's eastern provinces. Three other Romanian soldiers were seriously wounded.

Twenty-one of August's fatalities were American troops. In Iraq, where there are more than four times as many US personnel, the death toll was 22. Given the typical ratio of five wounded for each death, it is likely that over 100 American soldiers suffered some degree of injury during August in the Afghan theatre.

France lost 10 dead and 23 were wounded when insurgents ambushed a patrol to the east of Kabul on August 18. Five Canadian, three Polish and two British soldiers died. Germany, Denmark and Latvia lost one each. The total number of US and NATO deaths so far in 2008 now stands at 198.

There is no precise figure for the number of casualties suffered by the Afghan government army and police but, according to figures made public last month, an average of 150 police are being killed each month.

The NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) currently has some 52,000 troops at its disposal and faces a guerilla insurgency that is beginning to rival the most intense stages of the resistance in Iraq during 2006 and 2007. Insurgents loyal to the Taliban regime that was overthrown by the US invasion in 2001 are extending their attacks on NATO targets from the ethnic Pashtun provinces of southern Afghanistan to areas around Kabul.

A separate 19,000-strong American-commanded force operating in the mountainous and difficult terrain along the eastern reaches of the Afghan-Pakistan border faces well-organised opposition directed by former Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar—a favourite of the CIA during the guerilla war against the Soviet occupation force in Afghanistan in the 1980s—is believed

to be operating from safe havens in the Federally Administrated Tribal Agencies (FATA) of Pakistan.

The 71,000 foreign troops are reinforced by the 65,000-strong Afghan government army. It is so poorly equipped, however, that few of its units are capable of operating without US/NATO air support, logistics and intelligence.

The number of fighters at the disposal of the Taliban and Hekmatyar is the subject of wildly divergent estimates. The main Taliban commander, Jalaluddin Haqqani, may be able to call upon the services of 15,000 to 20,000 men. Hekmatyar, who has only returned to prominence in Afghanistan over the past four years, most likely commands a far smaller force. Despite suffering thousands of dead and wounded each year from US air strikes or in one-sided clashes with far better armed American and NATO forces, both wings of the insurgency have been able to sustain their guerilla operations. Islamist militants from other parts of the world are believed to be assisting the native Afghan insurgents—as they did during the Soviet-Afghan war. The estimates of how many range from 500 to as high as 8,000.

The ferocity of the fighting has transformed a British-operated hospital at Camp Bastion in Helmand province into what a doctor described as the “busiest trauma hospital in the world”. It treats over 100 patients a week, “more than half with major trauma from explosions and requiring surgery,” according to a Reuters report on August 29. The casualties include US/NATO troops, Afghan army and police personnel, Taliban fighters and civilians. Among the wounded in the facility on the day that reporters visited was an infant girl no older than 18 months who had been hit by US fire in a “mistaken attack on civilians”. She was not expected to survive.

One of the major targets of the insurgents are US and NATO supply convoys travelling from the Pakistani port city of Karachi to Afghanistan via mountain passes in Pakistan's FATA. According to tribesmen in the Khyber Pass region interviewed last week by the British *Sunday*

Telegraph, an attack takes place against convoys en route to Kabul virtually every day. “You see vehicles destroyed by rockets on the side of the road,” a local tribal leader reported. “The wreckage isn’t there for long. The [Pakistani] Army soon removes it to make it look as if they are still in control of the road, but they are on the verge of losing it.”

According to the *Telegraph*, US military equipment looted from ambushed supply convoys is openly sold in various markets in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. Their journalists reported seeing helmets, uniforms, maps, entrenching tools, ration packs and service medals.

Contractors, not military personnel, drive most of the supply vehicles running goods into Afghanistan. Many are Afghans or Pakistanis lured into this dangerous work by the promise of significant sums of cash. While updated figures are not available, at least 80 contractors had been killed as of June 2007 and at least another 879 wounded. In the past several months alone, the deaths of dozens more have been reported.

Afghan civilian deaths for the year climbed to near 1,000 last month due to the massacre on August 22 of more than 90 men, women and children in a US air strike on the village of Azizabad in the western province of Herat. The Bush administration and the US military are still denying the killings took place.

Last Thursday, German troops shot dead a woman and two children who were in a car that allegedly did not slow down fast enough as it approached a checkpoint in the northern city of Kunduz. In apparent retaliation, a roadside bomb hit a German patrol on the outskirts of the city on the weekend, though no casualties were inflicted.

Hundreds of Afghans took to the streets of Kabul yesterday to protest over what they claim is the latest atrocity against civilians by US/NATO troops. A man and his two infant children were allegedly shot dead in their house during a raid by occupation troops on the outskirts of Kabul. In the eastern province of Paktika, ISAF has admitted that artillery fire called in yesterday to support ground troops struck civilian dwellings and killed three children and wounded at least seven other non-combatants.

Fighting is likely to intensify in Afghanistan, particularly in the east, over the coming weeks due to developments over the border in Pakistan. The Pakistani government on the weekend suspended several military offensives against Taliban-linked militants in the Bajaur agency of the FATA and the Swat Valley district of North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Initially, the ceasefire was justified on the grounds of allowing hundreds of thousands of civilians who have fled the fighting to return to their homes for the Muslim season of Ramadan. The real motive is more likely the September 6 vote in the Pakistani parliament to install a new president, following last month’s resignation of former dictator Pervez Musharraf.

The candidate of the governing People Party of Pakistan (PPP), Asif Ali Zardari, faces challenges from two other candidates. The Islamist party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and politicians from NWFP have made ending the military offensives the price for supporting Zardari. Many religious and ethnic Pashtun Pakistanis sympathise with the resistance to the US/NATO occupation in Afghanistan and view the anti-Taliban operations in the FATA as an unjustified proxy war on behalf of the United States.

The month-long ceasefire will enable insurgent forces that dispersed or went to ground to avoid air strikes to regroup and cross back into Afghanistan. Hekmatyar is believed to operate from Bajaur, under the protection of local Pakistani Taliban warlords. There have been reports that a significant number of foreign Islamist militants are also in the agency.

In July, an insurgent assault on a US outpost in the Konar village of Wanat, just miles from the border with Bajaur, led to a major battle and left nine American troops dead and 15 others wounded out of a total garrison of 45. Last week, another small US post in Konar came under attack but the assailants were driven off.



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