

Germany's war in Afghanistan

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The official explanation that the 3,500 German soldiers stationed in Afghanistan are only “construction workers in uniform” is no longer tenable. The events in which they are embroiled are becoming bloodier each day. Increasingly, German soldiers are killing insurgents and civilians, or are themselves being killed.

Even the Bundeswehrverband (Armed Forces Association), which regards the Afghanistan deployment quite favourably, has accused the German government of deception and of downplaying the dangers. “We are at war,” association chairman Bernhard Gertz told the press.

Social Democratic Party (SPD) defence expert Jörn Thiessen and his Free Democratic Party (FDP) colleague Birgit Homburger expressed similar sentiments. “The government is putting up a smoke screen and is afraid of a public debate,” Homburger told *Financial Times Deutschland*. Germany is conducting combat operations in Afghanistan.

This week, *Welt Online* reported German and American secret service sources saying that the increasing tally of rocket attacks on German military bases in Kunduz and Faizabad were “a sign on the wall.” According to the web site, German officers in Kabul are worriedly asking the question: What would happen if 20 or 30 soldiers were killed in a single attack?

Earlier in September, a booby trap exploded near the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, killing a 29-year old German sergeant major and injuring three paratroopers.

One day later, German soldiers attached to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) killed a woman and two children, and injured four additional children. They came under fire when the two civilian vehicles they were travelling in approached a checkpoint operated by German military police along with Afghan soldiers and police.

According to the ministry of defence, both vehicles

were initially brought to a standstill, but before they could be inspected one of the vehicles “moved abruptly.” German soldiers, and likely members of the Afghan security forces as well, fired warning shots. Then security forces in a vehicle approximately 100 meters from the checkpoint opened fire on the first car.

According to a report in *Financial Times Deutschland*, it was only the German soldiers who fired at the fleeing car. However, the rules of engagement are clear that only Afghan police should open fire.

It is quite possible that in the heat of the moment the German soldiers lost their nerve and unleashed their deadly fire on the Afghan family. “The fact that there have been a significant number of attacks on our soldiers in north Afghanistan plays heavily on the nerves of the men. This is not really a surprise,” said Bundeswehrverband chair Gertz.

This killing of innocent men, women and children is the inevitable consequence of the neo-colonial war being conducted by the US and its NATO partners. The occupation forces are trying to suppress the Taliban-led insurgency with increasing brutality. The forces occupying Afghanistan are confronted with a rapidly growing armed resistance. Ever since Germany took over the command of the rapid reaction force in northern Afghanistan in June, its troops have been regarded as an occupying power, and have been opposed as such.

Recent assurances by Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung (Christian Democratic Union, CDU)—that the German armed forces continue to enjoy a good reputation among the Afghan population, who even understand the reasons for German attacks on civilians—are not only cynical but are disproved by the daily attacks on German army patrols.

It is estimated that attacks by insurgents have increased this year by 50 percent. For weeks, American and allied forces have been losing more soldiers in

Afghanistan than in Iraq. The German government and virtually the entire opposition are well aware of this, but they remain firmly behind the deployment.

Ulrike Merten (SPD), chairman of the Parliamentary Defence Committee, immediately called for support for government proposal to raise the upper limit for the number of German troops stationed in Afghanistan by 1,000, to 4,500, when the country's mandate is renewed in October. "In a situation which is clearly aggravated, you have to answer by increasing the quota," she said.

Defence Minister Jung also made an unannounced visit to Kunduz to demonstrate his support for the German troops and their combat operations.

In mid-August, a German patrol 35 km south of Kunduz was attacked by a suicide bomber. According to information from army circles, the attacker was able to manoeuvre his motorcycle very close to the patrol before detonating his bomb. The explosion was so large that it destroyed two vehicles, injuring five soldiers, two of them seriously.

Twenty-eight German soldiers have been killed since early 2002, when German troops began their deployment to Afghanistan, but there are no precise figures for the number of civilians and insurgents killed by German soldiers. In early September, it was announced that a German patrol had fatally wounded an alleged attacker. According to the police chief of the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan, the man killed was an unarmed shepherd.

These recent attacks have prompted a new debate over German operations in Afghanistan. While opinion polls record that the vast majority of Germans reject the war, the establishment parties vehemently defend German participation.

Any criticism raised in official political circles is mostly aimed at demanding more aggressive military action. The Greens, when previously in coalition with the SPD, agreed to the deployment of the German military to Afghanistan, and are now strictly opposed to any withdrawal. The chair of the Greens parliamentary faction, Jürgen Trittin, says the military operations are necessary and that there is no alternative.

However, many media commentators have expressed concern that the growing opposition to the war could prove politically explosive.

In an editorial, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* complained

of the "half-heartedness with which those politicians responsible, from Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier down to Defence Minister Jung, present their Afghanistan policy to the public." The column argues that it is necessary to tell the people the truth. Since no one any longer believes the fairytale that German soldiers are operating as a sort of humanitarian aid agency in the Hindu Kush, it is finally time to begin an open campaign for German interests and their military implementation.

And this is exactly why this war is being conducted. It is anything but a "just fight" for "democracy and freedom." On the contrary, the US and its allies are engaged in a neo-colonial war, aimed at making the country a regional base for staging operations into resource-rich Central Asia. All the establishment parties in Berlin agree that the withdrawal of the German armed forces is out of the question. This is borne out by the fact that the government has just sent a contingent of the elite KSK special forces to support troops in the Hindu Kush, and tasked them with seeking out and destroying the Taliban.



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