

US intelligence, military deliver dire estimates of Afghanistan war

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11 October 2008

Seven years after the Bush administration launched "Operation Enduring Freedom" with the relentless bombing of Afghanistan, US intelligence agencies have concluded that the situation in the devastated country is on "a downward spiral," and that prospects are poor for stabilizing the US-backed government and militarily defeating the growing armed resistance.

These are the conclusions drawn by a classified draft National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that is in the final stages of preparation, according to US officials cited Wednesday in the *New York Times*.

According to the *Times* account, the report, which represents the consensus view of 16 separate US intelligence agencies, concludes that "the breakdown in central authority in Afghanistan has been accelerated by rampant corruption within the government of President Hamid Karzai and by an increase in violence by militants who have launched increasingly sophisticated attacks from havens in Pakistan."

The report, which essentially warns that Washington is in danger of losing its war in Afghanistan, is not to be released in final form until after the US November elections.

While the US and its NATO allies have beefed up their occupation forces by some 20,000 troops over the last 18 months, the same period has seen a 50 percent increase in the number of armed attacks carried out by Afghan resistance fighters, whose ranks have been swelled by civilians seeking revenge for the deaths of relatives killed in stepped-up American air strikes and house-to-house raids.

On Tuesday, villagers in the southern province of Helmand reported that a US air strike claimed the lives of 40 civilians. In one demolished house, a couple and their eight children perished. The villagers reported that there were no Taliban fighters in the area when the bombs struck.

"There are confirmed reports of civilian casualties; however, it is unknown at this time how many," a terse statement from the US-led occupation forces read.

The Pentagon found itself compelled to acknowledge on Wednesday that it indeed slaughtered dozens of civilians--most of them children--in an August 22 air strike

on the village of Azizabad in Afghanistan's western Herat province. The US military, which initially denied that any civilians had been killed, now admits to killing 33 unarmed men, women and children along with 22 "anti-coalition militants." Afghan officials have continued to insist that 90 civilians--the majority of them women and children--died in the attack.

Hostility to the US puppet regime headed by Karzai has grown as the country's economy has continued to deteriorate. Most recent figures put the national unemployment rate at 40 percent, and it is estimated that nearly half the population are unable to get enough food to meet minimal nutritional requirements.

According to US estimates, government forces control less than a third of the country, and many believe that to be an overestimate. Meanwhile, the Taliban and other forces opposing the US-led occupation have established control over increasingly large swaths of the country, installing their own mayors, courts and police forces.

At the same time, official corruption is rampant. As the NIE confirms, the heroin trade accounts for fully half of the country's gross domestic product.

NATO officials announced this week that they had reached an agreement with the Afghan regime to use the foreign occupation forces to suppress the drug trade, which according to Pentagon estimates earns \$60 million a year for the Taliban. Germany, Spain and other NATO countries have opposed such a move, believing that it will only stir up further popular opposition to the occupation.

The problem is compounded by the fact that government officials are probably making considerably more from narcotics trafficking. Last week, the *New York Times* published an article citing multiple official sources linking the Afghan president's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, to heroin trafficking.

The paper cited American narcotics investigators who reported that "senior officials at the DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] and the office of the Director of National Intelligence complained to them that the White

House favored a hands-off approach toward Ahmed Wali Karzai because of the political delicacy of the matter."

The dismal assessment drafted by the US intelligence agency found confirmation from senior military commanders this week.

Admiral Michael Mullens, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Pentagon reporters Thursday that the situation in Afghanistan has been headed in "the wrong direction" for the last two years.

"The trends across the board are not going in the right direction," Mullen said. "It will be tougher next year unless we get at all these challenges."

Also on Thursday, the top US military commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, told the French news agency AFP that "ultimately the solution here in this country will be a political solution, not a military one."

The intelligence estimate from Washington and the statements from the US commanders echo recent assessments provided by a British military commander and the British ambassador in Afghanistan.

Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, the outgoing commander of British forces in Afghanistan, told the press last weekend, "We're not going to win this war," and that the best that could be hoped for was "reducing it to a manageable level of insurgency that's not a strategic threat."

Meanwhile, the French publication *Le Canard enchaîné* quoted a memo recording a discussion between the British ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, and a French official last month in which Cowper-Coles insisted that the US-NATO military presence in the country "is part of the problem, not the solution."

According to the document, the British ambassador described a corrupt and bankrupt Afghan regime that survived only thanks to the foreign occupation forces. The only way out of the crisis, he affirmed, was by replacing Karzai's regime with an "acceptable dictator."

British officials have apparently concluded that the US-initiated war in Afghanistan is unwinnable, and American military commanders, their forces stretched to the breaking point by the deployment of 152,000 troops in the occupation of Iraq together with the 33,000 in Afghanistan itself, appear largely in agreement.

There is no indication, however, that Washington is about to concede defeat in this seven-year-old war. Justified as a retaliation for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the war is part of a drive to establish US hegemony over the oil-rich regions of Central Asia that were opened up in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution. This remains a key strategic objective of the American ruling elite.

According to a report in the *Washington Post* Thursday, the Bush administration has responded to the NIE by

ordering a major reassessment of US strategy and tactics in Afghanistan, an initiative that may well lead to a substantial escalation of the US intervention there.

According to the *Post*, given the upcoming election and the subsequent change in administrations, "senior officials have expressed worry that the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is so tenuous that it may fall apart while a new set of US policymakers settles in."

Under consideration is a significant increase in the number of troops as well as stepped-up intervention into western Pakistan, where already, as the *Post* points out, "Military Special Operations forces and CIA operatives [are] now conducting regular secret incursions."

The *Post* notes that an escalation of the dirty colonial war being waged by American forces in Afghanistan would enjoy bipartisan support.

"Presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain are unlikely to question a major new US commitment; both have called for an increase in US troops," the *Post* writes. "And unlike Iraq, where lawmakers have argued for years over funding and troop levels, there is bipartisan backing for doing more, and doing it quickly, in Afghanistan."

In short, the November election will provide no means for the American people to express their overwhelming hostility to the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead, it appears increasingly likely that an escalation prepared by the Bush administration on the eve of the vote will be continued by the next administration, no matter whether Obama or McCain is victorious at the polls.



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