

Advocate of Afghan “troop surge” selected as head of British Army

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In an unusual "clean sweep" replacement of top command positions in the UK's armed forces, General Sir David Richards has been appointed the new head of the British Army. He replaces General Sir Richard Dannatt.

The October 17 reshuffle means that three commanders with significant experience in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq now have key leadership roles in the armed forces.

Gen. Richards was commander of British forces in Sierra Leone in 2000 and East Timor in 1999, and has also served in Northern Ireland and Germany. In his recent post as the head of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, Richards was the first non-American to command United States forces since the Second World War.

Richards' vacated position as Commander-in-Chief of British land forces is taken by Lieutenant General Peter Wall, who has served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Lieutenant General Sir Nick Houghton, who has served in Iraq, has recently been selected as Vice Chief of Defence Staff. The British military has been under considerable strain, with an expanded military role in southern Afghanistan countering a popular insurgency while still maintaining a besieged presence in southern Iraq.

The other new military chiefs named were Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, who will be the next First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff and Air Marshal Stephen Dalton, who becomes a four-star air chief marshal and Chief of the Air Staff.

The senior appointments are viewed as a snub to Dannatt, who was expected to be promoted to Chief of Defence Staff, the overall head of the military. It is believed that he was passed over due to his public criticism of military policy and comments on the pay and conditions of British Army soldiers.

More significant is the fact that with the selection of Richards to head the British Army, the political and

military elite is cementing the so-called Washington/London "Afghan consensus": namely that only a massive military deployment into Afghanistan and the brutal crushing of all opposition can save the US-led occupation regime.

Richards has long been a vocal proponent of a "surge" of foreign forces into Afghanistan, and has called for an increase of 30,000 troops. In an interview with the BBC recently he said, "I think militarily there is a case for more troops. They don't all have to come by any means from the UK. NATO ISAF nations between them have a large number of troops, so I think perhaps we would be looking at others in the first instance."

Following the failure of other NATO nations to commit significant numbers of troops to the more dangerous southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan, Richards is believed to favour sending up to 5,000 more British troops on top of the 8,000 already deployed. The other 25,000 troops would be made up of US reinforcements and newly trained soldiers from the US-backed Afghan Army.

The creation of such a force is problematic due to the nature of the Afghan conflict. On October 22, nine Afghan soldiers were killed and four others injured by a US air-strike on an army checkpoint in the eastern province of Khost. The Afghan defence ministry condemned the attack, warning that such incidents would "weaken the spirit" of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and undermine its relations with the US troops who train the force. The US military said its forces "may have mistakenly killed and injured" Afghan soldiers in a case of mistaken identity, "on both sides." Just four days later another US airstrike in the eastern Ghazni province killed 20 Afghan security guards.

Richards has said that a negotiated settlement may be necessary to "end the conflict", but that any talks must take place with the Afghan government and NATO in a

"position of strength".

Although parliamentary ministers have publicly insisted that no further troops will be available for the Afghan occupation, senior military sources have told the *Independent* that talks have already been held in Whitehall about possible further deployment next year. This followed a request from General David McKiernan, the head of NATO forces in Afghanistan. The request is understood to be supported by Richards.

Richards will be working closely with the US commander, General David Petraeus, who is taking over as head of US Central Command. Petraeus, credited in Washington with reducing violence in Iraq through the "troop surge" last year, will now be in overall charge of US military policy in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Indicating the dangers into which many more young men and women are to be subjected to by Washington and London, the last British paratroopers—defending the remote Forward Operating Base Gibraltar, in Helmand province—returned home on October 26. Of the 160 men, average 23 years, who manned the base, almost one in three was killed or wounded; a casualty rate not suffered by British soldiers since the First World War.

The *Guardian* newspaper wrote, "The stories told by the survivors are brutal. Theirs is not a tale of technological might against a primitive foe, rather an insight into war seemingly unchanged throughout the centuries, a gruelling campaign involving daily skirmishes against a redoubtable enemy."

Security conditions in Afghanistan are worse than at any point since 2001. Aid agencies have been warning for several months of a spread of insecurity to previously more stable areas, including provinces bordering Kabul.

As a result of a previous harsh winter, severe drought and high food prices there is an impending humanitarian crisis in parts of the country. Up to five million people face food shortages, of which 1.8 million are at high risk, which could have serious public health implications and cause further internal displacement.

The Afghan population also continues to suffer in ever-greater numbers from the increasingly indiscriminate occupation-inspired violence. On October 16, angry villagers from Nad Ali district took 18 bodies—including badly mangled bodies of women and children—to the governor's house in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah.

Haji Adnan Khan, a tribal leader in the city, said there might be more bodies trapped under the rubble. A BBC reporter in Lashkar Gah said he saw the bodies—three

women and the rest children ranging in age from six months to 15 years.

The incident occurred days after a British military spokesman said that NATO aircraft had killed more than 60 Taliban fighters massing to attack Lashkar Gah.

Several recent attacks, aimed at placing pressure on occupation forces to leave Afghanistan, have taken place in Kabul, demonstrating the clearly deteriorating security situation in the capital.

On October 25, three employees of the courier company DHL, including a Briton and a South African, were killed in a shoot-out in Kabul. These deaths came less than a week after a British aid worker was killed in the capital while she was walking to work.

This month, the journalist and historian, Max Hastings added his name to the growing list of pro-occupation politicians and military leaders turned "realists" concerning the conflict in Afghanistan.

Hastings has reported as a foreign correspondent from more than 60 countries and covered 11 wars for the BBC amongst others. He states that reports of the killing of hundreds of Taliban fighters are "strategically meaningless" because NATO is "absent from vast areas of this intractable country, where the insurgents prosper. There is greater gloom about the conflict than at any time since the Taliban was ousted in 2001."

He continues, "It is only possible to travel outside heavily fortified bases in helicopters or armoured vehicles. Afghan gratitude for the creation of a few schools and hospitals is outweighed by the simple fact that, in a diplomat's words: 'Seven years ago most of the population felt safe. Now they don't.'"

What then does Hastings propose? He offers something that is perhaps germinating in the minds of many military and political figures: "The highest aspiration must be for controlled warlordism, not conventional democracy. A civil war may prove an essential preliminary before some crude equilibrium between factions can be achieved. If this sounds a wretched prognosis, it is hard to find informed westerners with higher expectations.



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