

Afghanistan: A rise in civilian deaths and foreign troop fatalities

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During the month of November, a further seven British soldiers—including two Ghurkhas—were killed in fighting resulting from the US-led military occupation of Afghanistan.

On November 27, Tony Evans aged 20 and Georgie Sparks aged 19, both of J Company, 42 Commando Royal Marines, were on foot patrol north-west of Lashkar Gah, in Helmand province, when they came under attack from insurgent fighters armed with rocket-propelled grenades. Both marines died later from their injuries.

Their deaths brought the number of UK fatalities in Afghanistan to 128 since the British military joined the US-led invasion of the country in November 2001. Of these, 43 have been killed during 2008.

Over 1,000 service personnel in the occupation forces have now been killed in Afghanistan (the majority of these being US soldiers), according to the icasualties.org website. Significantly, more foreign troops have died in Afghanistan since May than in Iraq.

November also saw a continued rise in the numbers of Afghan civilians killed and injured as a result of US airstrikes. This year has seen the biggest rise in civilian casualties since the occupation began. Conservative estimates put the numbers of Afghans killed in violence related to the occupation in 2008 at around 4,000. At least one-third of these were civilians.

The deaths of civilians and the high-profile presence of occupying troops are bringing social and political resentments to a boiling point.

On November 28, protesters in the Afghan capital of Kabul pelted police with stones after British troops shot dead a local civilian and injured three others. An eyewitness told *Reuters* that British soldiers opened fire

on a minibus. Kabul's police chief, Mohammad Ayoub Salangi, stated blithely that "A convoy of British Isaf troops were passing here and they had a misunderstanding with a civilian vehicle."

The body was wrapped in white cloth and put into the back of a taxi and driven away from the scene as the crowd chanted, "Death to Bush, death to America."

People then threw stones at local police before being dispersed.

In a separate protest the day before, a crowd of Afghans gathered outside the United Nations headquarters in Kabul to demonstrate against civilian deaths in air strikes.

Such is the anger over the mounting civilian casualties from the air-strikes that Afghan President Hamid Karzai felt compelled to denounce the actions of the occupation forces. On November 26, he told a news conference that he would bring down US planes bombing villages if it were in his power.

"We have no other choice, we have no power to stop the planes, if we could, if I could ... we would stop them and bring them down," he said. "We have no radar to stop them in the sky, we have no planes... I wish I could intercept the planes that are going to bomb Afghan villages, but that's not in my hands."

Karzai's statement demonstrates the pressures he is under as a political proxy for US imperialism. But his situation will only worsen. Both Washington and London have recently expressed their dissatisfaction with Karzai over his failure to deal resolutely with the burgeoning insurgency. Karzai has countered by blaming US/NATO forces and their attacks on the population for making the situation even more explosive.

Despite the presence of 65,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, with an additional 130,000 Afghan

security forces, the anti-occupation insurgency shows no signs of diminishing. Rather, the recent spate of suicide attacks in Kabul indicates that the insurgency may be closing in on the capital.

Britain has around 8,000 troops in Afghanistan, the bulk of which are based in the southern Helmand province. There is speculation that the incoming US administration led by Barack Obama, will put pressure on the UK to deploy more troops, as part of a "surge" strategy for Afghanistan. Foreign Secretary David Miliband, on a recent visit to Kabul, made it plain that the government did not rule out sending extra troops to Afghanistan.

In the past week, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has revealed the official cost of Britain's military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has reached more than £13 billion. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, the MoD has asked the Treasury for an immediate £3.7 billion this year to cover escalating expenditure, and sources said it will need another significant sum before the end of the financial year.

In a sign of shifting geo-political focus, £1.4 billion will be spent in Iraq and £2.3 billion in Afghanistan. The figures, disclosed in a written Commons statement by John Hutton, the defence secretary, represent an increase of nearly 25 percent over last year.

Defence officials have said that the increases are due mainly to new and better equipment for British troops in Afghanistan, described as "urgent operational requirements", including £700 million recently earmarked to buy tougher armoured vehicles to withstand roadside bombs. More money is also to be allocated for equipment for helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft to help prevent being shot down by rocket fire, better communications for aircrew, and "improved protection" for troops on the ground.

In part this is in response to recent inquests into the deaths of British troops that have condemned the poor equipment provided to British forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hutton told the Commons last week that total annual expenditure by the MoD amounts to over £37.5 billion. While the cost of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan comes out of the Treasury's "contingency reserve", new aircraft carriers, submarines, destroyers, Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft and a hi-tech battlefield vehicle for the army will come from what the *Guardian* called

"the MoD's hard-pressed budget."

The MoD also avoided requests from MPs to comment on an estimate by the Royal United Services Institute (Rusi) that the defence equipment programme is short of £15 billion.



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