

Britain: Brown announces pull-out from Iraq, more troops to Afghanistan

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Prime Minister Gordon Brown made a "surprise" visit to Iraq yesterday to announce a withdrawal of UK forces by July 2009.

The visit took place amidst tight security. Just days earlier, President George W. Bush had shoes thrown at him by *al Baghdadia* TV reporter, Muntadhar al-Zaidi, in protest at the catastrophic effects of the US-led occupation.

Brown made no mention of al-Zaidi, despite reports that the journalist had been unable to appear in court—he is expected to be charged with insulting a foreign leader—because he was so brutally beaten after his protest that he cannot stand.

The majority of Britain's 4,100 troops, many stationed at an air base outside Basra, are expected to leave Iraq by May 31, 2009.

What is presented in the media as a benign act by the Brown administration and an end to the foreign wars of the Bush-Blair era is nothing of the sort. The United Nation's fig leaf resolution legitimising the US-led occupation expires at the end of this month, so it was necessary for some other quasi-legal form to be found.

The deal announced by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki enables British forces to remain in place for a further seven months, and they have carte blanche to continue their military operations until that point. Al-Maliki also stated, "We can change the date or articles if that is necessary."

Some 400 UK forces are expected to remain behind after the withdrawal to help train Iraqi police and soldiers. More importantly, Britain's place is to be taken by some 4,000 US forces, which will set up their own headquarters.

Washington has concluded a separate deal, which will enable its troops to remain in place until at least 2011 and beyond. The US military commander in Iraq, General Ray

Odierno, said that a June 30, 2009 deadline for the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraqi cities was also likely to be breached. "It's important that we maintain enough presence here that we can help them get through this year of transition," said Odierno.

Notwithstanding Brown's cynical claims that Britain had helped make Iraq a "better place", there is no question that the withdrawal is a forced retreat made necessary by the overreaching character of London and Washington's geo-political ambitions.

The content of this was indicated by Brown on another unannounced visit at the weekend, to Afghanistan followed by a brief stopover in the Indian capital before flying to Pakistan. He visited British troops in Helmand province, held talks with the US-installed Afghan president Hamid Karzai and with the Pakistani Prime Minister, Syed Gilani.

Only last year Bush and former Prime Minister Tony Blair were citing the existence of an "arc of extremism" stretching from Iraq, to the Lebanon and Syria and ending in Iran as the gravest threat to western security. In line with the shifting foreign policy emphasis of Washington and London, Brown now warns of a "chain of terror" centred in Pakistan, officially an ally of the British and US governments.

In southern Afghanistan, Brown claimed that the efforts of British troops were aimed at preventing this "chain of terror" reaching through Afghanistan and Pakistan to British streets. He added: "The people of Britain are safer because of what you do here."

With the aid of a fawning press, he sought to project himself as a courageous war leader. The *Guardian* newspaper claimed that Brown "went closer to enemy action than any serving Prime Minister since Winston Churchill" because he apparently visited a watchtower "only" 35 miles from where a British soldiers was recently ambushed.

Following Brown's meeting with Karzai in Kabul, and the announced creation of an "anti-corruption task force" staffed by British officials, he released a statement calling pointedly for the puppet-president's "leadership on corruption," leaving behind the unmistakable impression that the UK government presently considers Karzai part of the problem in Afghanistan.

In Delhi, Brown solidarised himself with the Indian government's claims of Pakistan's complicity in last month's terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

During his visit to Islamabad, he used a press conference to confront the Pakistani leadership with the fact that three quarters of serious terror plots investigated in the UK were connected to al-Qaida in Pakistan. He also announced that British police want to interview the surviving suspect in the recent Mumbai terrorist attacks as part of broader inquiries into the group blamed for the atrocity, Lashkar-e-Taiba.

In private talks, Brown reportedly sought to lean on the Pakistani President, Ali Asif Zardari, over possible action by Britain to eradicate training camps based in Pakistan.

The ratcheting up of pressure on Kabul and Islamabad is aimed at preparing the way for a massive escalation of the conflict in Afghanistan by the influx of thousands of US and UK troops early next year. The full compliance of both regimes has been called into question of late, by Washington and London, as popular resentment in the Afghan and Pakistani population grows against US-led imperialist actions in the area.

Brown's recent visit was meant to put Kabul and Islamabad on notice that the furtherance of British and US interests does not necessarily accord with the political survival of either client regime.

In a statement to the House of Commons, following his return to the UK, Brown announced that Britain will send another 300 troops to Afghanistan in the next few months to help boost security in the run-up to elections next year. The move will increase the total UK presence in the country from just over 8,000 to around 8,300.

The prime minister had signalled during his Afghan visit that a reserve British contingent would be put on a more formal footing, with an unspecified number already drafted in from Cyprus to bolster the British presence in the south. The new deployment in Helmand province is understood to come mainly from the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment.

As if to underline the seriousness of the situation confronting foreign troops in Afghanistan, five more UK soldiers were killed immediately before and following

Brown's recent visit.

Four Royal Marine commandos were killed in December 12, in the bloodiest day for British troops in Afghanistan for two years.

In one incident, three marines, two from 45 Commando and one from Commando Logistics Regiment, were killed in an explosion south of Sangin. The marines died when they were approached by a 13-year-old boy pushing a wheelbarrow, which exploded. It is not known if the boy was aware that he was carrying a bomb.

One marine died instantly, a second died of his wounds before he could be evacuated and the third died of his wounds at the military hospital in Camp Bastion, the Ministry of Defence said.

In the second incident, a Royal Marine taking part in a routine patrol was killed in an explosion believed to be a mine blast near Sangin. The marine, from 45 Commando, died of his wounds while being taken to the hospital at Camp Bastion.

On December 15, a soldier from 29 Commando Royal Artillery died when his base in the Gereshk area of Helmand Province came under attack.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, a British soldier died after shooting himself, it emerged last night. The soldier was the second in Iraq to die in eight days from wounds thought to be self-inflicted.

These deaths bring the total number of UK troops killed while deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan to 178 and 133 respectively.

With the numbers of NATO/US troops set to increase dramatically over the next few months, so inevitably will the death and casualty rate of both soldiers and Afghan civilians.



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