British defence secretary prepares escalation in Afghanistan

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In a speech to an international conference on January 15, Britain's defence secretary John Hutton delivered the UK government's sharpest public criticism of its European NATO allies as regards the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

Urging an increase in NATO troop deployment to the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan, Hutton accused his European counter-parts of expecting the US to do all the "heavy lifting" and said it was time for them to "step up to the plate."

"It is not honest, credible or, I think, sustainable to say the Americans can do more. That is not an alliance, which is one-way traffic. It is not for us to go on saying the Americans can go on doing all the heavy lifting."

Hutton continued: "It isn't good enough to always look to the US for political, financial and military cover. This imbalance will not be addressed by parcelling up NATO tasks—the 'hard' military ones for the US and a few others and the 'soft' diplomatic ones for the majority of Europeans.

"Freeloading on the back of US military security is not an option if we wish to be equal partners in this transatlantic alliance. Anyone who wants to benefit from collective security must be prepared to share the ultimate price," he asserted.

Hutton claimed that such measures were in the interests of international solidarity. The "struggle in Afghanistan is a defining issue" for NATO, he said. "NATO has to stand together."

But at a Ministry of Defence (MoD) press conference he revealed a more fundamental consideration—the "overstretch" of British armed forces.

"Our armed forces' operational tempo is not sustainable in the longer term," he said. "We just don't have enough and we are going to have to do more—all of us—if we are to be successful."

The British government's attempt to place further pressure on other NATO members is part of the planned escalation of the war, which will be undertaken by the new Obama administration in Washington.

Integral to this, is a counter-insurgency offensive that will become ever bloodier as the US and UK encounter widespread resistance to their presence. London is acutely aware, as is Washington, that it cannot easily subdue this with existing military forces.

Under its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) command, NATO has around 55,000 forces in Afghanistan. Added to these under US command are a further 20,000 troops, set to be increased by 30,000 in the coming months. In comparison with Iraq, the US had over 150,000 troops at the height of last year's "surge". Afghanistan has a population 16 percent larger than Iraq's and almost 50 percent more territory, presenting a more challenging military environment due to its rugged terrain and lack of suitable roads.

Other comments by Hutton deserve further consideration.

As all the claims justifying the US-led invasion have emerged as outright lies to justify imperialist occupation, there has been a shift in propaganda.

Having said the war was aimed at tracking down Osama bin Laden, the British government is now emphasising that it is a matter of "national security".

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has declared that a "chain of terror" runs through Afghanistan, eventually ending in Britain—raising the spectre of terrorist bombing campaigns in the UK. Hutton said that stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan directly affected "the safety of British citizens here on our own streets."

Commenting on this shift, the *Guardian* newspaper

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explained, "The government is deeply concerned about growing questioning of the presence in Afghanistan. Privately, officials say they are more likely to get their message across if the emphasis is placed on Britain's interest rather than on improving the lives of Afghans."

A BBC-commissioned poll towards the end of last year suggested nearly 70 percent favoured the withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan.

Now the political and military elite in Britain are attempting to prepare a reluctant public for more deaths and casualties as an expected deployment of up to 3,000 additional troops are sent to join the 8,500 already fighting in the southern Helmand province.

The past few weeks have been the bloodiest so far for British troops in Afghanistan.

A soldier from 29 Commando Regiment, Royal Artillery and a marine from 45 Commando, Royal Marines were killed by an explosion in Helmand province while participating in an operation late on the night of January 14. Both were in their twenties.

Another British soldier from the 1st Battalion, The Rifles was killed while on foot patrol with Afghan forces in Sangin, Helmand province.

These deaths take the number of British killed since the start of operations in 2001 to 142. Over 20 British soldiers have been killed since November, in winter months traditionally regarded as the "quieter" period in Afghanistan's history of conflict.

On January 16 a helicopter carrying one of Afghanistan's most senior army generals and 12 soldiers crashed killing all aboard. Taliban insurgents claimed to have downed the Russian-made Mi-17 helicopter, but the Afghan military said in a statement, that poor visibility caused the craft to slam into a jagged mountainside in the Adraskan district of Herat province in western Afghanistan. Much of Afghanistan is currently covered in rain and snow, which has been hampering military transport as well as civilian flights. Whatever the truth behind the crash, it was one of the largest losses of life in a single incident that the Afghan army has suffered in recent years and a serious blow to its command. The general, who died, Fazl Ahmad Sayar, was one of four regional commanders. He was in charge of army operations in the west of the country. Meanwhile, the security situation in the Afghan capital continues to deteriorate. A suicide car bomb attack on a heavily guarded road between the German embassy and a US military base in Kabul January 17, killed two Afghan civilians and a US soldier while wounding six other US troops, officials said.

Another suicide bomber attacked a convoy of NATO and Afghan police in eastern Afghanistan later the same day, killing one civilian.

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