Obama orders 17,000 more troops to Afghanistan

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President Barack Obama on Tuesday ordered the dispatch of 17,000 additional US troops to Afghanistan in a major escalation of the increasingly bloody American-led occupation of the war-ravaged country.

In a brief written statement issued by the White House—Obama did not personally address the American people to inform them that a growing number of their sons and daughters would be sent to kill and be killed in defense of US strategic interests in Central Asia—the president signaled that the escalation in Afghanistan would be combined with an intensified military intervention across the border in Pakistan.

He cast the increased deployment as a response to a deteriorating situation in "Afghanistan and Pakistan," and linked the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan with an Al Qaeda safe haven "along the Pakistani border," which he claimed—echoing the rhetoric of his predecessor—"threatens America."

He implicitly linked the growth of the anti-US resistance in Afghanistan to a failure by the Bush administration to devote "the strategic attention, direction and resources" the war in Afghanistan "urgently requires," and spoke of his administration's comprehensive strategy review for Afghanistan "and the region."

The announcement was timed to precede a meeting of NATO defense ministers this week in Krakow, Poland. Hinting at stepped up US pressure on American allies to increase their own troop deployments under the direction of Washington and NATO, Obama said his administration would develop its strategic goals "in concert with our friends and allies as together we seek the resources necessary to succeed."

These are euphemisms for an escalation of US and NATO military violence that in the course of more than seven years has killed tens of thousands of Afghans and claimed the lives of 574 American soldiers, including 155 just in 2008, the deadliest year of the war since the ousting of the Taliban government in November of 2001.

Obama spoke of achieving "clear and achievable objectives," a reference to a policy shift advocated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration who oversaw the military surge in Iraq, away from any pretense of establishing democracy in Afghanistan toward a more focused concentration on counterinsurgency operations aimed at exterminating popular resistance to the US and its puppet government in Kabul.

The Pentagon said Tuesday that the 17,000 additional troops would consist of 8,000 Marines from the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, who will deploy to Afghanistan in the late spring of 2009, about 4,000 soldiers from the 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, set to deploy in mid-summer of this year, and 5,000 support troops. The Marines are based at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and the Army troops are from Fort Lewis, Washington.

They will be sent to southern Afghanistan, which has increasingly come under the control of the Taliban and other anti-US forces.

The units had initially been slated to be sent to Iraq. Obama said the military was able to send the troops to Afghanistan because his administration was "responsibly" drawing down US forces in Iraq.

In fact, the US troop level in Iraq remains at 140,000, and the White House has thus far failed to implement Obama's campaign pledge to withdraw one combat brigade a month and remove all combat troops from Iraq within sixteen months of his coming to power. Top military commanders have publicly questioned this timetable and Obama has indicated his willingness to break his campaign promise—which, in any event, would leave tens of thousands of "non-combat" troops in Iraq indefinitely.

There are presently 36,000 US troops in Afghanistan, including 6,000 who deployed last month after being ordered to the country by the Bush administration. The 17,000 new troops announced Tuesday increase the US military presence by nearly 40 percent, and it is expected that Obama will comply with the demand of the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, for a total of 30,000 additional troops once his administration's strategic review of the war effort is completed in late March.

There are currently, in addition to the US forces in Afghanistan, 32,000 troops from other NATO countries.

The increasing toll on the Afghan people resulting from the US-led war was indicated by a United Nations survey released Tuesday, the same day as Obama's announcement, reporting that civilian deaths rose 39 percent in 2008 from 2007. The UN put the total of civilian deaths last year at 2,118, compared to 1,523 in 2007.

This is the highest yearly civilian death toll reported by the UN since the toppling of the Taliban in November 2001. It is undoubtedly a major underestimation, since the US routinely counts all those it kills in air strikes and raids as Taliban or other insurgents.

The UN attributed the majority of the civilian deaths to the Taliban and other anti-US forces. However, it acknowledged that US, NATO and Afghan government forces killed 828 people, 555 of them in air strikes. This is an increase, according to the UN, of 32 percent over 2007.

The responsibility for the growing carnage rests squarely with the United States, which used the terrorist attacks on 9/11 as a pretext to carry out long-developed plans to conquer Afghanistan in order to establish hegemonic control over the vast oil and natural gas resources

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of Central Asia, just as it subsequently invaded and occupied Iraq, which holds the second largest oil reserves in the world.

The devastation wrought by the US war and occupation of Afghanistan is the culmination of three decades of US imperialist intrigue and subversion, beginning with the covert CIA campaign at the end of the 1970s to arm Islamic guerrillas, the mujahedin, in order to destabilize the pro-Soviet government and draw the Soviet Union into a disastrous land war. Many of the forces financed and backed by the US, including Osama bin Laden, went on to form Al Qaeda.

The US has fared no better than the Soviets in Afghanistan. After more than seven years, US and NATO forces and the puppet regime of Hamid Karzai barely control the capital of Kabul. Just last week, Taliban guerrillas seized government buildings in the center of Kabul in coordinated attacks that left 26 dead and 57 wounded.

The main US-NATO supply route into Afghanistan, from northwest Pakistan across the Khyber Pass, has repeatedly been attacked by insurgents, whose control is increasing over Pakistani tribal regions that border Afghanistan and even more centrally located areas such as the Swat Valley, threatening the Pakistani regime in Islamabad.

The US response is to step up its military violence on both sides of the border. US air strikes on Pakistani border regions have increased dramatically in recent months, with four more such attacks carried out in the month since Obama took office. The Obama administration is putting increased pressure on the Pakistani government to step up its military action against Islamic insurgents in the border regions and moving inexorably to expand the war directly into Pakistan.

Last week, Senator Dianne Feinstein, the Democratic chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said it was her understanding that CIA drones that fire missiles into Pakistan were being flown from a US base inside Pakistan, rather than from across the border in Afghanistan. The Pakistani government has denied the existence of such a base, but US press reports this week cited former American intelligence operatives as confirming Feinstein's remarks.

The US escalation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is heightening tensions with more formidable rivals in the region, particularly China and Russia, and bringing other neighboring countries into the war's vortex. On Tuesday, Gen. David Petraeus, the chief of the US Central Command, held talks in Uzbekistan aimed at securing new supply routes to neighboring Afghanistan. This follows Kyrgyzstan's decision, after accepting $2 billion in financial aid from Russia, to close a US air base in that country that is critical to the transport and supply of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the killing of civilians in Afghanistan proceeds without letup, fueling popular anger against the occupation and the US-backed regime in Kabul. NATO troops shot and killed two civilians in southern Afghanistan's Kandahar Province, a spokesman said on Wednesday. On Monday, a US air strike in the Gozara district of Herat Province killed six women and two children, according to local Afghan officials. In typical fashion, the US is standing by its story that the raid killed 15 insurgents.

Obama's announcement on Tuesday underscores the essential continuity, whatever the tactical differences, between US imperialist policy under his administration and that of Bush. Obama is no less committed to using military violence and aggression to defend the economic and geo-political interests of the American ruling elite than his predecessor.

He was promoted by factions within the foreign policy and political establishment who saw in him an instrument for improving the image of the United States after the foreign policy disasters of the Bush administration and implementing certain changes in tone and approach, as well as a means of containing and defusing popular anti-war sentiment within the US.

Having won the presidency largely by appealing to popular opposition to militarism and war, he is presiding over a major military escalation that contains the seeds of a far wider conflagration. This demonstrates the imperviousness of the existing political system to any democratic control by the people.

Among those who have hailed Obama's decision to escalate the military intervention in Afghanistan and expand it into Pakistan are those who most fervently supported the war policy of Bush. Republican Senator John McCain, his presidential opponent, welcomed Obama's announcement, and the *Wall Street Journal* applauded the new administration's policy in an editorial entitled "Barack of Afpakia," a reference to its focus on stepped up military action in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Team Obama recognizes the Pakistan dimension to the Afghan problem," the *Journal* wrote, "even calling the place ‘Afpak.'"

Obama's expansion of the war further exposes those liberal and "left" forces, such as the *Nation* magazine and various opportunist organizations who promoted his campaign, lent credibility to his campaign rhetoric, and hailed him as the leader of a democratic renewal of America. They share political responsibility for the increased death and destruction that will be inflicted on the people of Central Asia and the growing toll in American military casualties that will result from the new administration's imperialist policies.

The expanded war in Central Asia and the ongoing military violence and repression in Iraq demonstrate that only the independent political mobilization of the American and international working class against militarism and its source, the capitalist system, can put an end to war.

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