US: Army base ordered on stand-down after multiple suicides

Naomi Spencer
29 May 2009

Members of the 101st Airborne Division were ordered to suspend regular operations at the Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Army base Wednesday after the suicide toll rose to 11 for the year.

The stand-down, termed the "Second Suicide Stand-Down Event," by acting top commander Brig. Gen. Stephen Townsend, was prompted by two suicides on base last week. Fort Campbell, which leads the Army in base suicides, instituted a similar stand-down in March that was effective across the entire Army. The current, base-specific stand-down is in effect until Friday.

Speaking to the 25,000 personnel stationed at the base, Townsend told soldiers not to hide suicidal feelings and to assist others to get help. He ordered soldiers to complete part of a suicide prevention program in the next few days.

The Army's reported number of active-duty soldier suicides has climbed every year of the Afghanistan and Iraq occupations. In January, the suicide rate surpassed the combat death toll.

So far this year, the Army lists 64 confirmed or suspected cases in which troops have taken their own lives. This comes atop a record 133 confirmed suicides reported by the Army in 2008, an increase over another record-breaking year in 2007, when at least 115 active-duty personnel killed themselves. Suicides in other branches of the military, such as the Marines, are also on the rise.

The 101st Airborne is a heavily deployed division, particularly for operations in Afghanistan. Its three combat brigades have been redeployed to Iraq for at least three tours.

According to a May 28 Associated Press report, Fort Campbell's 4th Brigade has just returned from a 15-month tour in Afghanistan. Such deployments have inflicted deep psychological trauma on troops and strain on military families. Head chaplain Col. Ken Brown commented to the AP, "We've been at war at this installation for seven years.... I think that has a cumulative effect across the force."

The latest suicides come as the Obama administration escalates US operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. By the end of the year, the number of US personnel in the region will reach some 68,000.

The stand-down order is not likely to prevent suicide, according to mental health experts who were interviewed by the cable news channel CNN. Dr. Mark Kaplan, a military suicide researcher who has worked for the Veterans Administration on prevention programs, said, "It sounds like an order.... I'm not sure that a command like this is going to alter the course of somebody who is on a trajectory of self-harm." Kaplan noted that far from encouraging treatment for mental or emotional problems, the military fosters a social and professional stigma around psychological disorders.

Individuals are ordered into violent situations, where they witness or participate in horrifying acts. Soldiers charged with imposing an occupation on a hostile population are subject to a culture of brutality, paranoia, suspicion of civilians, and hatred.

Although deeply disturbed by their experiences, soldiers are under pressure to hide their trauma from their peers and families. Soldiers come back from tours to financial and relationship strains at home and are pressured to redeploy, in some cases even after being diagnosed with mental disorders. They suppress trauma with alcohol and pills for stress and insomnia, which frequently compound psychological instability.

"More often than not, these are individuals who'll get liquored up, so to speak, and have access to a gun and die from a self-inflicted gunshot wound," Kaplan told

© World Socialist Web Site

CNN. The stand-down order was “the equivalent of ‘Just Say No’ to prevent drug abuse,” mental health expert Bill Lichtenstein at Columbia University added.

Mental disorders are extremely common among combat veterans. Currently, about one in five military personnel who have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan—300,000 in all—have post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression, according to a 2008 Rand Corp. study. The study estimated that only slightly more than half sought any treatment.

At the same time, the military issues blanket prescriptions for active-duty soldiers. A recent Army mental health survey reported that 12 percent of soldiers in Iraq and 17 percent in Afghanistan were taking antidepressants, anxiety medication or sleeping medications.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site