

US reinforcements in place in southern Afghanistan

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The Obama administration's "surge" in Afghanistan is taking shape, with 10,000 marines from the North Carolina-based 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) completing the commencement of their deployment to the volatile province of Helmand over the next several weeks.

An Army Aviation Brigade, with some 100 troop-lift helicopters and gunships, is already operating out of the neighbouring province of Kandahar. They will be joined in the next month by the 4,000-strong 5th Stryker Brigade, a mobile unit that is almost entirely mounted in eight-wheeled armoured Stryker vehicles.

These units make up the bulk of the 21,000 additional troops that Obama has ordered to Afghanistan to suppress the Taliban-led insurgency against the US-led occupation of the country. By the end of the year, the total US force will reach close to 70,000. NATO states and other US allies are supplying close to 32,000 troops, with Britain, Canada, the Netherlands and Australia providing the units that are conducting combat operations in the majority ethnic Pashtun provinces of southern Afghanistan, where support for the Taliban is strongest.

Over the coming weeks and months, the 2nd MEB will be hurled into a bloody summer offensive in Helmand, along with the 8,000 British troops and US special forces already operating in the province. The British force in Afghanistan has now suffered 166 fatalities—more than the 165 British troops who lost their lives during the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The US Stryker Brigade deploying to Kandahar will be used alongside a Canadian task force that has been trying to stem insurgent activity in the province for the past four years, losing 119 dead and hundreds wounded in the

process.

A key objective of the summer offensive is to impose a greater degree of authority over the southern provinces before the Afghan presidential election on August 20. Taliban leaders have called for a boycott of the ballot, declaring any vote under foreign occupation to be illegitimate.

After nearly eight years of war, the occupation forces and Afghan government army still control only the major cities and towns of southern Afghanistan. Taliban forces hold sway over the rural areas—where most of the population lives.

As well as seeking to hunt down Islamist militants, the US reinforcements will be tasked with confronting the militias that oversee large-scale opium production in southern Afghanistan on behalf of various Afghan warlords and drug syndicates. Some 8,200 tonnes of opium were produced in Afghanistan in 2007—more than half in Helmand alone. A British military raid this month on just one of the scores of drug factories in the province resulted in the seizure of 5.5 tonnes of opium paste and 100 kilograms of refined heroin.

After years of essentially ignoring the narcotics trade, the occupation forces are increasingly alarmed at the financial relationship between the insurgency and the drug syndicates. The Taliban is said to earn tens of millions of dollars in protection money and taxes. The syndicates are also suspected of having links into the highest echelons of the US-backed Afghan government and numerous paid operatives in the US/NATO-trained Afghan Army, police and border guards.

Marine spokesman Colonel George Amland told

journalists this week: “I wish it were as simple as looking at alleged Taliban leaders. We are going to have to assess what is really Taliban influence and what is a spin-off of the narco-industry and how these forces interact.” Among the suspected drug barons in Kandahar is Ahmed Wali Karzai—the brother of the President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai.

The proposed new US commander in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, told a Senate confirmation hearing earlier this month that “casualties will likely increase” as the US reinforcements are sent into combat operations against the Taliban and syndicates.

Even before Obama’s surge troops arrived, 2009 was set to have the highest number of occupation casualties for the entire Afghanistan conflict. So far, 131 soldiers have been killed—72 American and 59 NATO—compared with 123 in the full first six months of last year. In 2008, the summer months of June, July and August witnessed a sharp spike in fatalities and this year is likely to be worse.

The Taliban has learnt to avoid direct engagements with better armed and equipped American and NATO troops, whose main tactic is to go to ground and call in air strikes to devastate any insurgent attack. When the occupation forces do move into villages or towns that the Taliban controls, its fighters—like guerillas throughout history—either leave the area or blend in with the locals.

The insurgents appear to be focusing on attacking the not-so-well-equipped Afghan police and targeting the occupation forces with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The majority of US and NATO casualties are caused by IED attacks on vehicles. The number of such attacks has soared by 80 percent this year compared with 2008, when more than 3,200 explosions were tallied.

Foreshadowing an even greater use of IEDs, a local Helmand province Taliban spokesman told a *Los Angeles Times* correspondent this month: “They [the occupation forces] must use the roads, and on the roads we will kill them.”

Faced with trying to wrest control of a vast area from an enemy they rarely see and which has local sympathy and support, the US/NATO military commanders rely heavily on terror tactics against both alleged insurgents and the civilian population.

General McChrystal has been nominated as overall commander in Afghanistan in large part due to his experience in directing such operations, particularly in Iraq. He previously commanded the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which was described by journalist Seymour Hersh as “an executive assassination ring”. During the Iraq war, the special forces units led by McChrystal carried out large-scale, targeted killing of alleged Iraqi insurgents, or their capture. According to Human Rights Watch, JSOC tortured prisoners at a secret detention centre in Baghdad.

Alongside the increased use of special forces hit squads, McChrystal told the US Senate that there would be no let-up in the air strikes against alleged Taliban positions—despite the burgeoning anger in Afghanistan over the number of civilians indiscriminately killed by US bombing missions.

On May 4, up to 140 men, women and children were slaughtered when F-18 jets and a B1 bomber repeatedly bombed the village of Granai, in the western province of Farah. According to the *New York Times*, a US military inquiry has admitted that US aircraft “did not comply with the standing rules of engagement” that theoretically require pilots to confirm that civilians will not be endangered by an attack.

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, such “mistakes” have taken place dozens of times, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths and injuries. As the fighting extends deeper in the Taliban heartland, the carnage will only escalate.



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