

July casualties highest of Afghan war

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The determination of the Obama administration to escalate its neo-colonial war in Afghanistan has led to a sharp increase in the casualties for both US and NATO troops. The Taliban and other insurgent movements are responding with daily guerilla attacks on the occupation forces, which lack sufficient numbers and logistical support to secure the ground they have been ordered to hold.

The number of US/NATO deaths in July has already reached 58—the highest monthly toll since the invasion in October 2001. The previous high was 46 dead in both June and August last year. Among the latest fatalities are 31 Americans, 18 British, four Canadians, two Turkish, one Italian and one Australian. The American losses include personnel from every branch of the military—Army, Marine, Navy and Air Force. Five part-time National Guardsmen who were sent to Afghanistan have lost their lives this month.

The most recent reported fatalities are a soldier of unknown nationality who was killed in a vehicle crash north of the Afghan capital, Kabul, and a British bomb expert who was killed while trying to defuse an explosive device in the southern province of Helmand.

Thousands of US marines and British infantry were flung into a major offensive in Helmand earlier this month to suppress the widespread opposition to the occupation and to seize control of Taliban-held areas.

While the marines operating in the province have thus far suffered only minor losses, casualties are depleting the British force which is operating in the area north of the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. Most of the British deaths this month have been suffered in Helmand, along with scores of wounded. A British field hospital treated 30 wounded in a single day.

On Monday, four American soldiers were killed by a massive roadside bomb in one of the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Afghan guerillas are staging such lethal attacks with increasing frequency. Roadside bombs cause close to 75 percent of NATO casualties and, at the current rate, US commanders expect the overall number of bombings this year to soar to 5,700, from 3,800 last year.

The ability of the Taliban to detonate thousands of explosives along roads and tracks used by NATO troops, without being warned by local people, testifies to two things. Firstly, the occupation forces have little control outside their bases and secondly, large sections of the Afghan population oppose their presence and sympathise with the armed resistance.

The primitive state of roads, apart from some major highways, and the difficult terrain in much of the country also contributes to the inability of the US and NATO forces to control the countryside. Like the Soviet occupation army in Afghanistan during the 1980s, they are heavily dependent on helicopters for personnel transport, re-supply and medical evacuations, and rely on aircraft to support ground troops who are engaged by Taliban fighters.

A string of aircraft and helicopter crashes this month—generally the result of either pilot fatigue or inadequate maintenance—suggests that American and NATO air power is being pushed to breaking point by the demands of the war. US aircraft alone had flown 17,420 missions by the end of June, compared with 19,092 in all of 2008.

An F-15 fighter jet crashed on Saturday in central Afghanistan, killing the two pilots. A US helicopter made a forced landing the same day, injuring a number of personnel. On Sunday, 16 people, including 10 Filipino contract workers, were killed when a Russian-made Mi-8 transport helicopter fell from the sky at Kandahar. On

Monday, a British Tornado crashed shortly after take-off at the same airport. The pilots were able to eject.

On July 14, six Ukrainian contractors were killed when a Mi-26 transport helicopter crashed in Helmand. The Taliban claimed they shot it down. In another crash this month, one Canadian soldier and two British troops died on July 6 when their helicopter fell from the sky just after take-off.

An inexorable logic is at work. As more troops flood into Afghanistan and are deployed into Taliban-controlled areas, casualties on both sides rise and the inadequacies of the occupation forces are demonstrated.

A description on Monday in the *Washington Post* of a raid by 200 marines on the Helmand market town of Lakari Bazaar provides a glimpse into the character of the fighting now taking place.

The article reported: “Arriving at Lakari Bazaar at daybreak Saturday for the raid, the marines went door-to-door, using explosives, rifles and axes to break into each store.” Before they arrived, the store-owners and local people had fled. In a clash outside the town, several men who fired mortars and small arms at the intruders were gunned down by a helicopter gunship. After gathering up bomb-making equipment, weapons and ammunition, the US troops prepared to leave as they did not have sufficient strength to secure the area. The Afghans were left with a ransacked town and bodies to bury.

Most military analysts predict that it would take a far larger force than the 100,000 or so foreign troops currently in Afghanistan at least five years to fully suppress the Taliban resistance to the US-led occupation.

Last Friday, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates told the *Los Angeles Times* that “victory” in Afghanistan was a “long-term prospect”. He warned, however, that tolerance for the near eight-year war was ebbing in the United States. “After the Iraq experience,” he said, “nobody is prepared to have a long slog where it is not apparent we are making headway. The troops are tired; the American people are tired.”

The stage is being set for the Obama administration to announce an even greater intensification of the Afghan war, justified through a media propaganda campaign that

it is necessary to take urgent steps over the next 12 months to secure “victory”. The Pentagon has already leaked to the media that the US commander in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, will most likely advise Obama next month that more troops and more resources are needed.

Gates pointedly told an Army audience on July 16 that he did not expect an increase beyond the 68,000 troops already deployed “at least probably through the end of the year”—suggesting that a further surge is anticipated in 2010. This week, the defence secretary announced that the size of the US Army will be temporarily enlarged by 22,000 troops for the next three years. The explicit reason for the increase was to provide additional personnel for deployment to Iraq and the burgeoning war in Afghanistan. The military is confident it will get the recruits due to the economic devastation and unemployment that the global financial crisis has inflicted on millions of young Americans.

The major powers in Europe, along with US allies such as Australia and New Zealand, are coming under tremendous pressure from Washington to commit more troops to the conflict and deploy them into frontline combat. NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer warned the European powers on Monday that belonging to the alliance “implies the willingness to accept sacrifice and share burdens”.

The consequences of the Afghan escalation has already been a frenzy of killing and violence against the Afghan and Pakistani people and a steadily growing tally of American and NATO dead and wounded. More will follow. In its first six months, the Obama White House has proven that its foreign policy is just as militarist and criminal as that of the Bush administration.



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