

Crisis mounts over Afghanistan as UK troop deaths exceed Iraq total

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The death of eight soldiers, three just 18-years-old, in a 24-hour period brings total UK troop deaths in Afghanistan to 184, exceeding the 179 killed during the occupation of Iraq.

The deaths, all in Helmand province, bring the total in the first ten days of July to 15. The stepped up casualty rate is due to Britain's involvement in Operation Panther's Claw, part of a major assault involving 4,000 US troops and 650 US-trained Afghan soldiers against the Taliban-led insurgency ahead of next month's elections.

Noticeably, there has been little mention in the media of the death toll suffered by the Afghan people. To the extent that any casualties are cited—usually as the result of US air strikes—they are dismissed as “Taliban” fighters. In truth, the Obama administration, with British backing, has stepped up its bloody war of colonial occupation by launching the so-called AfPak war.

A major counter-insurgency operation is underway in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since July 2, US marine units have moved from their base near the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, down the Helmand river valley as far as the town of Bahram Chah, 200 kilometres to the south on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. They have occupied the major towns of Nawa, Garmser and Khan Neshin. British troops, operating to the north of Lashkar Gah, have deployed to secure the road between the city and the town of Gereshk.

The tactics employed by US forces are modelled on the Iraq “surge” and are aimed at capturing and holding territory in the poverty-stricken province, which has been a stronghold of opposition to the occupation. Forward bases are also being established in villages and hamlets. Towns have been placed under military rule, and the occupied population is being ordered to attend meetings or *shuras*, where coalition officers dictate how they must conduct themselves.

News of the fatalities, coupled with rising concern over the dangers faced by British soldiers, has deepened opposition to the Afghan war amongst British workers and youth.

On July 9, thousands lined the streets of the small Wiltshire town of Wootton Bassett to pay their respects to five soldiers killed in Afghanistan as hearses carried their bodies from the

Royal Airforce base Lyneham. As the normally sombre occasion was taking place, news of the deaths of a further six British soldiers in Afghanistan came in.

Claire Wells, 23, the girlfriend of one of the deceased, told the *Guardian* that she had planned to live the rest of her life with Dane Elson, 22. “Now I’ll never see him again, I can’t bear it.” She didn’t think the troops should be in Afghanistan: “They are fighting a war we cannot win. There are too many of our lads dying.”

Her father concurred, saying, “This shouldn’t be happening. The minister said we had to make sacrifices. Where was he today? What are we fighting for? So they can have a vote in Afghanistan? It’s an internal problem. It’s not our problem. They’re sending our boys out to get killed.”

School friends of one of the dead soldiers, Private Robert Laws, called for the troops to come home. “It’s not our war,” said Euan McGuinness, “They shouldn’t be out there.” Simon Broome added, “Bring them home now. He was a great lad, he didn’t deserve this.”

Disillusionment is also spreading amongst serving soldiers, as indicated by a sample of censored letters written in Afghanistan and published in the *Observer* July 12.

In one letter dated June 25, a soldier writes, “If anything happens to me, don’t let them tell people I believed in the mission, because I don’t.”

A *Guardian*/ICM poll saw 47 percent of respondents calling for a withdrawal from Afghanistan.

This sentiment finds little or no expression within official political circles. Instead, both the main opposition parties, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, have denounced the Labour government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown for inadequately resourcing the war in terms of equipment and personnel.

Conservative leader David Cameron has lauded troops who he insisted were “fighting to prevent terrorism on the streets of Britain,” before calling for an expansion of the military deployment.

“It is a scandal that our forces still lack the helicopters they desperately require to move around in Helmand,” he said.

The government has faced accusations that a number of the latest troop deaths, mainly caused by roadside bombs, could

have been avoided if British soldiers had more access to helicopters. The Treasury had reportedly informed Ministry of Defence (MoD) officials that there would be no funds for extra helicopters because US forces had now in effect taken over Helmand and British forces would have to rely on US choppers.

Former Tory foreign secretary, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, said Brown had “no option” but to order the MoD to loosen financial controls: “The needs of combat operations are always additional to normal MoD funding. We did not defeat Hitler by deciding what we could afford.”

Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg denounced the government for refusing a request to send an extra 2,000 troops to Afghanistan for political reasons. The Army was not getting the “political backing” it deserved, he said on July 9.

Clegg told the BBC that “by all accounts” Brown made a “deliberate decision” not to send more troops because he was “worried by the domestic political reaction.” Britain, he added, had been “bailed out” by the US sending forces into Helmand Province and “Gordon Brown has got to stop pretending this is somebody else’s conflict.”

Brown sent an extra 800 troops earlier this year, raising total numbers to nearly 9,000. But General Sir Richard Dannatt, the head of the British Army, said last month that “more boots” were needed on the ground.

The July 12 *Sunday Times* reported that Dannatt had gone much further, attending a private dinner with Tory MPs, where he suggested that an extra 2,000 troops were needed in Helmand. His apparent political interference led one Labour minister to state that Dannatt “has crossed an important line. He is playing a high-risk game.”

David Crausby, a Labour member of the Commons defence committee, added, “It is not appropriate to play party politics at this time. Dannatt should just get on with the job.”

Such expression of bitterness notwithstanding, the government’s primary concern is to placate the army, while justifying the Afghan offensive and ensuring that political conflicts with the Tories and Liberal Democrats do not unintentionally provide a focus for anti-war sentiment.

Brown told the British Forces Broadcasting Service that there was a “chain of terror” linking “what’s happening in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the streets of Britain.” He issued a six-page letter to Members of Parliament (MPs) on Britain’s continued role in the Afghan conflict, in which he claimed the Afghan-Pakistan border had emerged as “a new crucible of terrorism” linked to three-quarters of the most serious terror plots against the UK.

More importantly, MoD sources confirmed that government ministers were “re-examining” troop numbers in Helmand.

The *Observer* reported July 12 that “thousands more troops could be sent to Afghanistan within months under an emergency review of the UK mission being carried out by the Ministry of Defence.”

The paper spoke of “fresh calls from senior military and

political figures for urgent reinforcements—and an end to Treasury constraints on spending on the Afghan war.”

In a letter released prior to an appearance before parliament’s liaison committee this week, Brown had made clear that troop numbers could be raised. “We will, of course, continue to review our force levels, based on the advice of our commanders and discussions with allies,” he wrote.

It is thought that a possible extra 2,000 troops could be deployed in the coming months.

A retreat from Britain’s military commitment in Afghanistan is presently inconceivable within all of Britain’s major parties—not due to the repeatedly cited threat of terrorism, but because it would endanger British imperialism’s parasitic relationship with the United States.

In Iraq, the Blair government, with the full backing of the Tories and Liberal Democrats, offered itself as the Bush administration’s most loyal ally in order to strengthen its position against its European rivals, Germany and France, while hopefully projecting its interests in the oil-rich Middle East.

Afghanistan has increasingly assumed the position once occupied by Iraq under Bush in the strategic military and political calculations of the Obama administration.

In an interview with Sky News broadcast July 12 during a state visit to Ghana, President Barack Obama acknowledged the rising death toll in Afghanistan, but said the “mission” was vital to US and European security.

“Great Britain has played an extraordinary role in this coalition,” he said, “understanding that we cannot allow either Afghanistan or Pakistan to be a safe haven for Al-Qaeda, those who with impunity blow up train stations in London or buildings in New York. We knew this summer was going to be tough fighting. ... We still have a long way to go.”

“The contribution of the British is critical,” he added. “The likelihood of a terrorist attack in London is just as high, if not higher, than it is in the US—that’s why Tony Blair and now Gordon Brown have made this commitment.”

The coalition strategy would need to be evaluated after the Afghan presidential elections in August, Obama said. Four more US soldiers were killed in Afghanistan just hours before he spoke.



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