

Britain: Spike in casualties used to push for more troops in Afghanistan

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The British establishment and media are waging a concerted campaign to exploit an unprecedented wave of combat deaths to manufacture popular support for stepped-up British participation in the US-led surge in Afghanistan.

On Friday, it was reported that General Sir Richard Dannatt, chief of the general staff, had won a “personal victory” when demands he had made for increased resources in Afghanistan were formally presented to Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Earlier it had been reported that Dannatt’s request in March for a long-term increase in the UK troop presence in Afghanistan from 8,300 to 9,800 was turned down by the government on cost grounds. Since then, Dannatt has been waging a public campaign, supported by the media and in collaboration with the Conservative opposition, questioning the Labour government’s commitment to the war in Afghanistan.

Dannatt’s “shopping list” of demands was reportedly handed to Brown by Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, Chief of the Defence Staff.

The *Sunday Times* reported that military commanders also turned down a request by Brown to visit Helmand, in the same week Dannatt made his own visit to Afghanistan in the company of the BBC. The Afghan commanders reportedly told the Ministry of Defence that Brown’s visit could prove a distraction to “ongoing operations”.

The military’s criticisms are now finding an echo within the Labour Party. John Hutton, Brown’s former defence secretary and one of the six cabinet resignations surrounding Labour’s disastrous European election campaign, wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph*, “The mood on the ground is unequivocal—more resources in each of these areas (helicopters and European logistical support) would be helpful. This review of British troop levels cannot wait until October, as has been suggested, before it is addressed.”

The demand for greater resources is bound up with the Obama administration’s decision to massively intensify its counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan, doubling the number of US troops in the country from 32,000 to 68,000.

Thousands of US marines, together with 5,000 British troops concentrated in the Helmand province, are involved in the brutal suppression of opposition to foreign occupation. These

intense “clear and hold” operations have seen a rise in the number of troop casualties.

Close to three coalition force troops are being killed daily. Little mention is made of the death rate amongst Afghan civilians—hundreds of whom have been killed in aerial bombardments.

Fatalities amongst UK troops are now higher than in Iraq, including 16 Britons killed this month. These deaths, and the youth of those involved—their average age is just 20—are being cynically employed in the pro-war propaganda offensive demanding the despatch of even greater numbers, and to call for increases in defence spending at a time when savage cuts are planned across the public sector.

The constant refrain is that the Labour government is failing to commit the necessary resources to the Afghan war and Britain’s armed forces as a whole. As former Chancellor, Brown is charged with imposing constraints on defence spending compared to health and education; thereby downgrading the British military and undermining the national interest. Dannatt’s assertion that he was forced to travel in an American Black Hawk helicopter to visit UK troops in Afghanistan because “I haven’t got a British helicopter” was used to feed these claims.

Such charges turn reality on its head. If there is a deficit in troop numbers and equipment, it is because Labour has massively extended British military operations, launching some four wars during its term in office and fighting two—in Afghanistan and Iraq—simultaneously.

Brown has responded by asserting that an additional £4 billion has been made available for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while insisting, “We will do whatever is necessary and what is right to equip our armed forces.”

Others within the ruling establishment are warning that such pledges are not feasible. At the beginning of the month, the Institute for Public Policy Research argued that current spending on defence was unsustainable. Cuts of £24 billion in weapons programmes must be made, it argued, including abandoning plans to renew the Trident nuclear missile system.

“Fundamental choices are necessary. The attempt to maintain the full spectrum of conventional combat capabilities at the current scale has produced acute strains on resources and,

increasingly, on operational effectiveness,” it said.

More concerning for Britain’s ruling elite, the IPPR warned that the UK’s continued reliance on the US for military protection was “delusional.”

“There will be a future crisis that leaves us vulnerable to shifting American interests and opinion, relative US decline and European disunity and weakness, when Nato’s political glue fails to hold and Europe is left more exposed than at any time since the Second World War,” it said.

Labour and the Conservatives are committed to the £20 billion renewal of Trident. The suggestion that it should be scrapped, along with calls for the re-orientation of defence away from the US to Europe, has caused alarm and outrage amongst sections of the establishment.

This is especially the case because they anticipate the economic recession will place great strains on such military projects. Britain is expected to run a deficit of £175 billion this year, and all the official parties have pledged to make significant cuts across the public sector. Yet the cost of the war in Afghanistan alone has increased to more than £3 billion a year.

One area of conflict is expected to be the government’s proposed Strategic Defence Review. Last week, the cross-party Commons Defence Select Committee delivered a public rebuke to the prime minister, when it warned that key battlefield operations were being undermined due to the lack of helicopters. Committee chairman, Conservative James Arbuthnot, said, “We believe that the size of the fleet is an issue, and are convinced that the lack of helicopters is having adverse consequences for operations today and, in the longer term, will severely impede the ability of the UK Armed Forces to deploy.”

More pressing for the ruling elite is how they can win support for military spending, under conditions of growing casualty numbers abroad and rising unemployment and the slashing of vital public services at home. Even if the government is prepared to ring-fence defence spending, will it be able to convince the public that it is justified?

With opinion polls finding public support for the Afghan war almost evenly divided, the *Times* editorialised that the viability of Britain’s involvement is threatened by “an unpopular Government [that] is in a weak position to expound a coherent purpose to the campaign.” This meant, it argued that “Those, including *The Times*, who have supported the intervention since the outset” must make the case for war.

The war is necessary, it continued, “because the US and its allies are acting against those directly responsible for the murder of thousands of civilians of many nationalities on the American mainland”.

This assertion was almost immediately contradicted by the *Times*’ claim that “Afghanistan is no longer a sanctuary for al-Qaeda”. But consistency matters little for a media that has faithfully parroted all the lies told to justify colonial-style

intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The government’s original assertions—that the intervention was aimed at building democracy, liberating women, etc.—have been jettisoned. Conservative Defence spokesman Liam Fox wrote, “We are not talking about establishing a fully fledged Jeffersonian democracy in Afghanistan, a country that has never known such a thing”.

The argument now is that British troops are necessary in order to create a “secure” environment for elections in August. This is a ballot that is almost certain to see the return of President Hamid Karzai, whose administration is widely regarded as one of the most corrupt and unpopular in the world, and which has been maintained in power only due to the firepower of the Western coalition.

The *Times* continued its editorial by arguing that Al-Qaeda and the Taleban share a “symbiotic” relation, one based on a “common malevolent ideology” that must be rooted out. This claim is intended to justify not only an open-ended occupation of Afghanistan itself, but also the spread of war far beyond its borders.

“If Afghanistan were abandoned, the threat to Western security would be intensified by the effect on Pakistan,” the editorial argued. “A weak Pakistani Government allowed the Taleban in effect to use the Swat Valley as a means of destabilising Afghanistan. If constitutional government—however imperfect—in Afghanistan falls, then the country will immediately become a base for the equivalent movement in Pakistan.”

It is the broader geo-political considerations—staking out US and British control in the oil rich and strategic Middle East and Central Asia—that are the real motive force behind the war in Afghanistan.

To this end—the media hand-wringing over the fatalities of young British soldiers notwithstanding—plans are reportedly being drawn up to expand the armed forces by a further 5,000.

The *Telegraph* reported, “It is hoped that the recession and withdrawal from Iraq will attract extra recruits”—in other words that growing unemployment will force more young men to become cannon fodder for the British army.



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