Obama's war

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With Obama approaching the end of his sixth month in the White House, there is growing evidence that his administration is in only the first stages of what is shaping up to be a major and sustained escalation of the US war in Afghanistan.

Elected in large part because of the hostility of American working people to the militarist policies of the Bush administration, Obama and the Pentagon are waging an intensified and brutal counter-insurgency campaign that has the potential of dwarfing the carnage in Iraq and dragging on for another decade.

July, little more than half over, has already become the deadliest month for US-led forces since the war began nearly eight years ago. A total of 46 occupation troops have been killed, 24 of them Americans. This death toll—approximately three a day—is equivalent to what took place during the heaviest fighting in Iraq.

For Afghan government forces, the toll is far higher, with the regime in Kabul reporting that between six and ten members of the country's national police are being killed daily.

As always, the greatest price is paid by the Afghan people themselves, who are being killed in growing numbers and more directly subjected to the conditions of foreign occupation, as US troops carry out their "clear and hold" operations.

A telling indicator of the violence that is being employed against the Afghan people came last week from the US Air Force, which reported that it had dropped 437 bombs on Afghanistan in June. Close-air support missions flown thus far in 2009 by US warplanes had risen to 17,420 by the end of June, the Air Force command reported. This compares to 19,092 for all of 2008.

The increasing reliance on aerial bombardment is symptomatic of a ground force that is stretched dangerously thin. Its effect on the civilian population has been a succession of horrific massacres, including the slaying last May of over 140 people torn to pieces by a US bombing raid against two villages in Afghanistan's western Farah province.

The initial escalation of the American-led intervention will more than double the number of US troops in the country, from 32,000 to 68,000. This is in addition to 36,000 troops from other NATO countries.

The most visible aspect of this troop buildup is the deployment of 4,000 US Marines, together with thousands of British troops, in an offensive in the southern Afghan province of Helmand, considered a stronghold of the insurgency.

Operation Khanjar, as the offensive has been dubbed, is shaping up as a fiasco, with the large US force unable to carry out any major engagements with the insurgents. The latter have melted back into the population, while conducting guerrilla attacks that have exacted a heavy toll, particularly among British troops.

In the areas in which the US-led force operates in Helmand, the insurgents reenter the civilian population or retire to safe havens across the border in Pakistan. But the size of the occupation force is entirely inadequate to hold the areas or prevent the insurgents from returning once it has left.

The threat of a far bloodier war has emerged clearly in the recent statements of senior US military commanders.

Among the bluntest were those of Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who visited the US headquarters at Bagram Air Base outside Kabul Wednesday. Mullen warned that the US forces faced "very difficult fighting" and said he did not know how long the war would continue.

"I know it's got progressively worse over the three, three-and-a-half years since 2006," he told the BBC. "And the Taliban has got much better, they are much more violent, they are much more organized and so there's going to be fighting that is associated with it."

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If after eight years, conditions for the American-led occupation forces have grown "progressively worse" and the insurgency has become "better," "more violent" and "more organized," this can only be a measure of the Afghans' hostility to the occupiers, which assures a growing number of insurgents and broad popular support for their struggle.

The US escalation has been severely hampered by its inability to mobilize any significant Afghan force to fight alongside American troops. While US commanders had envisioned one Afghan soldier for every American in the Helmand offensive, just 650 have been deployed alongside the US force of 4,000.

The American escalation has also failed to gain the support it sought from Pakistan's military, which it had hoped would be deployed to block Taliban fighters seeking to cross the border. Pakistani troops remain tied down by the US-instigated campaign in the country's northwest, which turned some 2.5 million people into internal refugees.

While US commanders portray the escalation in Afghanistan as an effort to win over the population, the reality is that massive military violence is being unleashed against an impoverished people in order to force it into submission.

The original pretexts given for waging the war in Afghanistan have fallen by the wayside. The authorization of the use of military force legislation passed by the US Congress in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on Washington and New York City was predicated on the American military being used to hunt down those blamed for these atrocities—Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, a name that now goes virtually unmentioned in official Washington circles.

As for Bush's purported desire to bring democracy to the Afghan people, Obama has explicitly rejected such a goal as unrealistic. Instead, Afghanistan is headed for elections on August 20 in which it is universally accepted that the immensely unpopular President Hamid Karzai will be re-elected thanks to the web of corruption that ties him to warlords and criminal elements. The inevitable result will be intensified popular anger against the regime in Kabul and the US troops that protect it.

The only reason left for what is now clearly Obama's war is the real and original one—the utilization of American military might to assert Washington's dominance over the oil-rich and geo-strategically vital region of Central Asia.

The American military brass is openly lobbying for more troops to accomplish this aim. The implications of these demands were made clear Thursday when Defense Secretary Robert Gates said he is considering a proposal to increase the size of the US Army by 30,000 soldiers in order to relieve the stress caused by the Afghanistan buildup and the continued US occupation of Iraq.

There could be no clearer indictment of the Obama administration. Brought into office on a wave of antiwar sentiment, his administration is preparing to expand the US military in order to prosecute a dirty and protracted colonial war. Meanwhile, the country's top military commanders exert their considerable influence over the government even more directly and openly than under the Bush administration.

American militarism under Obama enjoys support from the entire political establishment. The Democratic Congress votes to fund the wars, the US mass media parrots the war propaganda of the White House and the Pentagon, and the so-called "left" organizations that previously oriented towards protest politics have stopped their protests and tacitly backed Obama's war.

Nonetheless, there remains deep hostility to war among masses of American working people, who will ultimately be forced to pay the price for militarism, through deepening attacks on their living standards, a growing toll of dead and wounded soldiers, and, ultimately, the drafting of working-class youth to fill the ranks of the expanding army. The struggle against war can be taken forward only through the independent mobilization of the working class against the Obama administration and the capitalist profit system that gives rise to militarism.

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