

As US, NATO casualties mount

Pentagon to press for more troops in Afghan war

Jerry White
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Six American troops were killed in fighting in Afghanistan over the weekend, along with a French soldier and two Canadians. The spike in casualties follows the deaths of 74 NATO soldiers last month, including 43 Americans. July was the deadliest month for occupying troops since the invasion of Afghanistan eight years ago.

Most of the deaths occurred in the south of the country—particularly in the Helmand province—where US and British forces launched an offensive last month. Three of the US deaths occurred in a roadside bombing in Kandahar province on Saturday. The same day, two Canadians were killed when an improvised bomb exploded near their patrol just west of Kandahar.

The other three Americans were killed Sunday in Wardak province, to the west of the capital city of Kabul, when their convoy was struck by a roadside bomb and then came under small-arms fire from insurgents. The French soldier was killed in a firefight outside of Kabul on Saturday.

The US, which has nearly doubled the number of forces it has in the country since last year—sending in an additional 21,000 troops—is escalating military operations in advance of the August 20 nationwide presidential elections. The election, originally scheduled to take place six months ago, is aimed at bolstering the legitimacy of the deeply hated and isolated government in Kabul.

Last month, President Obama said he hoped to “transition to a different phase” of the war after the Afghan presidential election. Increasingly this has been framed as a transition from a “counterterrorism” war—conducted by the Bush administration ostensibly to hunt down Al Qaeda leaders in remote areas of the country—to a protracted and bloody counterinsurgency campaign in highly populated centers. This will mean a sharp increase in US-led military violence against the Afghan people aimed at suppressing opposition to the puppet regime in Kabul and occupation forces.

In an upcoming report to the Defense Department, General

Stanley McChrystal, who took over as commander for all US and NATO forces in Afghanistan last month, is expected to ask the Obama administration for additional troops and advanced weaponry to carry out this operation. McChrystal’s report is scheduled for August 14.

According to a senior US military official who spoke with CNN, McChrystal will ask for more troops and equipment for conducting intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, along with defenses against roadside bombs. He is also expected to call for an increase in the number of Afghan security forces, doubling the army from its current 150,000 troops to more than 300,000.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* last week, Gen. McChrystal acknowledged the military and political crisis US forces were facing and said the central aim of the military strategy was to undermine support in the population for anti-occupation forces, which the military regularly refers to as the Taliban.

“There are areas that are controlled by Taliban forces,” he said. “There are places ANSF [Afghan] and coalition forces cannot go routinely, insurgents are free to operate and free to impose a shadow government. While they are not typical safe havens, the insurgency is more comfortable than we want them to be. And so over time those are areas we intend to reduce.”

Explaining the need to shift to a strategy of “classic counterinsurgency,” McChrystal said, “Our intent is to prioritize first on those areas where we have significant population centers; in some cases those are also places with a heavy insurgent presence. But it is to protect the population. If the insurgents are in very remote areas with very little population, they don’t have access to what they need for success, which is population. So we will seek to separate them from the population.”

Far from “protecting the population” counterinsurgency operations, including those carried out by the British in Malaysia and the US in Vietnam and El Salvador, involved

the extermination of large sections of the population and the assassination of all political opponents. This has already been seen in Afghanistan with the thousands killed by US missiles and bombs. A study by the Human Rights Unit of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported that civilian deaths in Afghanistan have soared by 24 percent for the first six months of 2009.

An indication of the type of campaign being planned was given during a July 29 press briefing by Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. His comments were made following a trip to Afghanistan, where he was served as an adviser on Gen. McChrystal's Strategic Assessment Group.

"We have to go far beyond the normal limits of counterinsurgency," Cordesman said. "We, the United States, are going to have to provide the resources if we want to win. This means very substantial budget increases, it means more brigade combat troops and it means financing both the civilian effort needed in the field and a near doubling of Afghan national security forces."

In response to a reporters' question about how long the US would maintain the occupation of the Central Asian country, Cordesman said, "I don't think anyone looking at the history of counterinsurgency believes that we can definitely turn this around during the term of President Obama. We can make a lot of progress.... But in a recent RAND study, it pointed out that the average duration of an insurgency where the government won was 14 years.... We wasted half a decade and empowered the enemy for that many years. It's not something you're suddenly going to turn around."

The Obama administration also plans to escalate the war into Pakistan. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Navy Admiral Michael G. Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has set up a "Pakistan Afghanistan Coordination Cell" in the basement of the Pentagon to prosecute the war throughout the region.

The *Times* noted that Mullen began his military career as a young officer on a destroyer off Vietnam and has drawn lessons from that war. "He is very sensitive about the importance of trying to do something about the enemy sanctuary in Pakistan," a retired colonel told the newspaper. "He recognizes it is very analogous to what we experienced in the Vietnam War, with the enemy leveraging Laos and Cambodia."

The escalation of military violence is also bound up with concerns within the political establishments in the US, Britain, Canada and other countries over popular opposition within their own countries to the neo-colonial war. The current offensive is aimed at demonstrating "success," particularly as casualties among coalition forces mount.

Last month, Defense Secretary Gates said victory was a

"long-term prospect" under any scenario and that the US would not win the war in a year's time. However, US forces must begin to turn the situation around in a year, he said, or face the likely loss of public support. "After the Iraq experience, nobody is prepared to have a long slog where it is not apparent we are making headway," Gates said in an interview. "The troops are tired; the American people are pretty tired."

The US is also expected to add pressure on its NATO allies, particularly Britain, to increase the number of troops and lift restrictions on what combat operations they can carry out. The demand for more troops comes as a committee from the House of Commons issued a report warning that there was a "serious risk" of the further loss of public support if the government didn't make it clear why 9,000 British troops were in Afghanistan.

"I think it's a very serious risk," MP Mike Gapes of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee told the *Times*. "People see men and women being killed for something, but they are not sure why they are being killed."

In July, Britain suffered its bloodiest month since the conflict began, losing 22 troops, with many more injured. The financial cost is also mounting, the newspaper said, with military operations in Afghanistan more than tripling from £750 million (US\$1.3 billion) in 2006-2007 to £2.6 billion (US\$4.4 billion) in 2008-2009.

A former Foreign Office minister, Kim Howells, meanwhile claimed there would not be public backing for a long war in Afghanistan, complaining that British attitudes to fighting wars were changing fundamentally. He told the BBC: "At the moment I don't think anyone is going to wear the notion of being in Afghanistan for 30 years and see the terrible drip, drip of casualties, deaths and funerals. I don't think the public are up for it any more. Everything has changed. We as a nation now don't want to send out soldiers anywhere. With that mentality I am not sure we would have ever won a big, serious war, as in the past."



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