

# British Army chief says military may have 40-year Afghan role

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The new head of the British Army, General Sir David Richards, has said that Britain could still be in Afghanistan in 40 year's time.

Richards, who takes over Afghan command as chief of the general staff on August 28, told the *Times*, "I believe that the UK will be committed to Afghanistan in some manner—development, governance, security sector reform—for the next 30 to 40 years."

Questioned about the heaviest troop losses of the Afghan occupation in recent weeks, Richards said that the British campaign was "demanding, certainly, but winnable."

"The end will be difficult to define; it won't be neat and clear-cut like the end of some old-fashioned inter-state war might have been," he added. "We must remember, though, that we are not trying to turn Afghanistan into Switzerland."

Richards stated that British troop involvement would be needed only in "the medium term" as the role of the army would "evolve", and the focus should shift to the expansion of the Afghan national army and police. But he chose his words carefully to emphasise the strategic importance of Afghanistan for Britain's long-term imperialist interests: "Just as in Iraq, it is our route out militarily, but the Afghan people and our opponents need to know that this does not mean our abandoning the region."

Richards' projection echoes those of several senior British officials who have hinted in past months of a decades-long UK military commitment in Afghanistan, including the British Ambassador to the United States, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, and the former defence secretary, Des Browne.

Richards, who will take over command from Gen. Sir Richard Dannatt as the UK's chief of the general staff, commanded British forces in East Timor in 1999 and Sierra Leone in 2000, and also served in Northern Ireland and Germany. Between May 2006 and February 2007 he headed NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. He was the first non-American to command US forces since the Second World War.

When Richards was appointed head of the British Army last October, the *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to its significance in relation to Afghanistan.

We wrote that "with the selection of Richards to head the British Army, the political and military elite is cementing the so-called Washington/London 'Afghan consensus': namely that only a massive military deployment into Afghanistan and the brutal crushing of all opposition can save the US-led occupation regime.

"Richards has long been a vocal proponent of a 'surge' of foreign forces into Afghanistan, and has called for an increase of 30,000 troops." (See: "Advocate of Afghan 'troop surge' selected as head of British Army").

Subsequently several thousand British and US troops have been deployed to Afghanistan, resulting in a rise in occupation-related violence and the highest rates of casualties of both Afghan civilians and foreign soldiers. Richards' comments coincided with the news of the deaths of three more British soldiers in Afghanistan, killed north of Lashkar Gah, in Helmand province, on August 6.

On August 8, another UK soldier died after an explosion east of Gereshk in Helmand province.

July was the deadliest month so far for British troops, with 22 killed, most of them during the first phase of Operation Panther's Claw. A further five UK soldiers have been killed in fighting this month. As of this writing, the death toll for British troops since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 stands at 196.

Recent fighting in Afghanistan has also led to a record number of battle casualties among foreign troops, defence officials have said.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, July 21, "More than 157 soldiers were treated at the field hospital at Camp Bastion in Helmand province last week, according to army medics. Numbers were so high that medics have been forced to break their own rules by accepting more wounded than the hospital is designed to take."

One medic told the BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, "The last few weeks have been an extremely busy period. There have been injuries like you've probably never seen or experienced." He referred to serious wounds caused by roadside bomb explosions.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has said that 51 members of the UK armed forces had limbs amputated by March 31, after

being wounded in Afghanistan. The latest figures published by the MoD, the highest so far recorded, reveal a significant increase in the number of wounded even before casualties from the latest fighting are factored in. Forty-six soldiers were admitted to field hospitals in Afghanistan in June, compared with 24 in May and 11 in April.

The MoD's figures do not give a detailed breakdown of the severity and nature of the injuries to British soldiers. But they state that 13 were "very seriously" or "seriously injured" last month, including life-threatening injuries and amputations. Over 200 soldiers have suffered such injuries since British forces began their campaign in Helmand three years ago.

Colonel Richard Kemp, ex-commander of UK troops in Afghanistan, told the *Sunday Mirror*, "This is a shockingly high ratio of the number of British troops deployed at any one time in Afghanistan."

*Sky News* cited Colonel Peter Mahoney, July 30, who has just returned from a tour as medical director responsible for clinical care at Camp Bastion. He said, "It's been busy, there's no doubt about it. There have been days when surgical teams are working constantly.... It is stressful for everybody dealing with injured young people, particularly when you are cutting off people's camouflage that you recognise as your own—that's always more emotive."

The news agency added, "In one week alone this month 157 wounded people were brought to the Camp Bastion field hospital for treatment, including British, American and Estonian troops, as well as Afghan soldiers and civilians, and even enemy forces.

"There have now been 2,650 UK personnel admitted to a field hospital in Afghanistan since the numbers started being recorded in March 2006. Of these 230 were seriously or very seriously wounded, and 2,280 were evacuated back to Britain."

Most of the deaths and serious injuries in recent months have been the result of roadside bombs or improvised explosive devices becoming increasingly sophisticated and deadly.

The recent words of a Welsh Guards officer indicate something of the psychological and personal impact that the deaths and injuries are having on serving soldiers in Afghanistan. Writing in the *Independent*, the soldier said he felt compelled to speak out after the deaths of seven men serving with or attached to 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, including its commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe and Corporal Dane Elson, 22, from Bridgend.

He said, "With each death, I think each of us experiences a feeling of total shock, powerlessness and impotence. Within your mind you feel you have to do something, especially if you knew the individual.

"Back at home that might be to jump in the car and drive to some secluded spot where you can get out and scream at the top of your lungs to let out all the anguish. But here nothing of the sort is possible. You are all enclosed within your camp or patrol base; there is no refuge, no private corner to go to, to deal with

your grief."

The soldier added, "When you read about a 'very seriously injured' casualty, that person's life is never going to be the same. Nor is it for the rest of their family, who will be sucked in and forever affected by the aftermath. I am talking about limbs removed, double or even triple amputations, on a scale that we've never seen before."

Accompanying the rise in foreign troop deaths and casualties is the increase in casualties and fatalities among Afghan civilians that goes largely undocumented or misrepresented by the media.

Over one thousand Afghans were killed in the first six months of 2009, according to a recent United Nations report.

A combination of deadly US/NATO air strikes and counter-occupation insurgent activity has led to a 24 percent rise in civilian fatalities, compared with UN figures from the same period last year.

Civilian deaths rose every month this year compared with 2008, except for February. May was cited as the deadliest month, with 261 civilians killed.

The BBC's David Loyn, in Kabul, says that even the large increase recorded by the UN is likely to be an underestimate, as many deaths are not counted. This is the third year the UN has counted civilian deaths, and the numbers have risen each year.

The BBC reported August 11 on the most recent unmanned US drone strike in South Waziristan, north-west Pakistan, near the Afghan border. Local intelligence officials were cited as saying, "at least 10 suspected militants" had been killed in the strike.

This was the latest in dozens of such drone strikes in the past year that have added to the undocumented civilian death toll.

The conflagration incited by the US/NATO military occupation is spreading ever closer to the capital. On August 10, just 10 days before elections are due to take place, Taliban militants attacked official buildings in Pul-i-Alam, capital of Logar province, just a few miles south of Kabul. Five Afghan police were reportedly killed and 26 others hurt as six militants fired rockets and grenades at the police headquarters and government offices.

A BBC report said that part of the city "was said to have been evacuated as military helicopters flew overhead and fired on the insurgents."



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