

Obama's AfPak war intensifies on both sides of border

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As low voter turnout in Afghanistan's presidential election last week provided further evidence of broad hostility to the US-led occupation, the armed insurgency has continued to escalate. The number of US and NATO troops killed in the country during 2009 reached 301 yesterday—already the highest annual toll of the eight-year occupation.

The most recent reported deaths include an unnamed soldier killed on Friday by a roadside bomb and 18-year-old Matthew E. Wildes, from Hammond, Louisiana, who was killed on August 27 when an insurgent IED (improvised explosive device) hit his vehicle.

On August 26, 27-year-old Staff Sergeant Kurt R. Curtiss from Utah was shot dead during a raid by US and Afghan government forces to seize a wounded local Taliban leader being treated in a rural health clinic in Paktika province. A five-hour gun battle with militiamen only ended when US helicopter gunships fired missiles into the clinic, reducing much of it to rubble and killing at least 12 people, allegedly militants.

The anti-occupation insurgency is active in at least half the country, gaining support due to popular hatred for the presence of foreign troops as well as the corrupt and ineffectual puppet government in Kabul. An element in the mass electoral abstention last week was the Taliban's call for a boycott, underscoring its growing influence. It is estimated that barely 30 to 35 percent of the population voted. In some areas, turn-out did not reach 5 percent.

On the eve of the August 20 election, the Taliban demonstrated its ability to strike targets in the centre of the capital, including a mortar strike on the presidential palace of Afghan president Hamid Karzai. Insurgent attacks have also increased around the strategic northern city of Kunduz, which had been relatively stable until recent months.

Events this week testified to the worsening situation facing US and NATO forces. On Tuesday, a massive bomb loaded into a truck exploded close to the offices of a Japanese construction company in the southern city of Kandahar. At least 43 people were killed and 65 wounded. The following

night, rockets struck the city centre near a branch of the Kabul Bank, causing a large fire. There were no casualties as the streets were virtually empty.

According to an Associated Press report, the Taliban has re-established a firm foothold in Kandahar, which was once the centre of its support in the ethnic Pashtun south. An Afghan employee of an aid agency anonymously stated: "The Taliban are inside the city. They are very active. They can do anything they want." Since Thursday, nervous Afghan Army units, backed by Canadian and US forces on the outskirts of the city, have moved to take over street security from the local police.

The new US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, is expected to advise the Obama administration over the next several weeks that thousands of additional troops will be needed to wrest back large areas of territory from the Taliban. General David Petraeus, the head of US Central Command, has warned of "tough fighting" ahead, though it is clear that any reportage in the US and international media will be highly censored.

A major offensive has been taking place for nearly two months in the southern province of Helmand, involving British troops and the US marine brigade that was sent by Obama to reinforce the occupation earlier this year. At least 29 of the 69 NATO deaths so far in August were in that province.

The main cause has been roadside bomb ambushes, suggesting that Taliban guerillas are active among the civilian population. There is no independent coverage, however, of the US and British counter-insurgency operations. News of the war is confined to occasional, sanitised and often propagandistic reports filed by embedded journalists. On McChrystal's orders, casualty figures are no longer being released, even of the number of alleged Taliban being killed or detained.

During the surge of US troops in Iraq in 2007, McChrystal served under Petraeus and directed special forces and death-squad operations that killed thousands of men suspected of being connected to the Sunni-based insurgency or the anti-

occupation Shiite Sadrist movement. He has been placed in command in Afghanistan to apply the same murderous counter-insurgency tactics.

Over the border in Pakistan, information is leaking out from the Swat Valley district of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) concerning the brutal methods that are being used there to crush support for the Taliban among the country's Pashtun population.

The Pakistani military launched a major assault during April and May in the Swat Valley, to crush the Pashtun Islamist movement, Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), which led a rebellion against the pro-US government and effectively took over the district. The assault was demanded by Washington, which feared that a truce signed earlier in the year between TNSM and Islamabad would lead to hundreds of militants crossing into Afghanistan to join the insurgency.

In the course of a month's fighting, 1,800 TNSM fighters were allegedly killed and over 900 others captured. As many as two million civilians were forced to flee the district due to the ferocity and indiscriminate character of the military's air strikes and ground bombardments. Hundreds of thousands have still not returned due to either the destruction of their homes or fear.

The Swat Valley remains occupied by some 50,000 soldiers and police. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan claims to have credible evidence that the security forces are carrying out extra-judicial killings of TNSM supporters. On August 11, it announced that it had information regarding two mass graves containing the corpses of alleged militants who had been executed by government troops. Sixty-five bodies were subsequently recovered from a site near the village of Kabal.

The corpses of men who had been detained by the security forces on suspicion of militant activity are now being dumped on the streets—blindfolded, hands tied behind their backs and shot through the head. Two corpses were discovered in the Mingora area on Wednesday, at least 15 others on Monday and 18 more last week.

The cousin of two men whose bodies were found on August 21 told the Associated Press: "More than a month ago, they were arrested on the charge of militancy involvement." The men's father had previously been killed and four brothers are still in the custody of the security forces. Their mother, Bakht Begum, said: "My sons had nothing to do [with TNSM]. They had no fight, they were innocent. Even my husband had no fault. They killed my husband and my two sons, and now they should release the others."

General Petraeus has voiced support for the brutal campaign, hailing the "robust Pakistani military operations"

that have "cleared militants" from Swat Valley and other areas of the NWFP.

The Obama administration is now pressuring the Pakistani government of President Asif Al Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani to send tens of thousands of troops into South and North Waziristan. The autonomous tribal agencies are the strongholds of the Pakistani Tehrik-e-Taliban, an Islamist Pashtun movement that gives safe haven to Afghan insurgents fighting the US-NATO occupation over the border.

The US military is continuing its own illegal operations to assassinate insurgent leaders and terrorise the civilian population inside the Waziristans using Predator drone aircraft.

On Thursday, a drone fired two missiles into a housing compound in South Waziristan, killing eight people. The alleged target was Waliur Rehman, who announced in a joint phone conference on Tuesday with new Tehrik-e-Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud, that he had assumed command of militants in the agency. On August 5, missiles fired by a Predator killed the former head of Tehrik-e-Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, as well as his young wife and 17 others. Since August last year, over 700 Pakistani civilians have been slaughtered by US air strikes.

The main impact of the killing of Baitullah Mehsud has been to intensify hatred in the tribal agencies toward US imperialism and the Pakistani government. On Wednesday, Hakimullah Mehsud told Agence France Presse: "We will take revenge and soon. We will give our reply to this drone attack to America."

The same day, a Taliban suicide bomber attacked a government checkpoint at the Khyber Pass crossing into Afghanistan, killing 22 border guards, while two trucks carrying fuel for NATO forces were set ablaze in the NWFP. One was attacked on the main Peshawar highway, the other near the border crossing into Afghanistan at Torkham.

The next several months, before the onset of the harsh winter in Afghanistan and North West Pakistan, are looming as the most violent and deadly in the eight years of the criminal US-led military occupation.



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