

# Gordon Brown reaffirms UK commitment to Afghan war

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British Prime Minister Gordon Brown reaffirmed the UK's commitment to the war in Afghanistan during a surprise visit to the country Saturday. He did so in the face of mounting popular opposition to the war, with polls indicating that two-thirds of respondents want Britain to leave Afghanistan immediately.

Brown's main political concern during his trip was to justify Britain's ongoing participation in the occupation, initially by responding to criticisms from the Conservative opposition and the media that his government has under-resourced the army.

With the majority of the 208 UK casualties in Afghanistan caused by roadside bombs, Brown promised another 200 extra anti-IED (improvised explosive device) specialists in addition to the 200 sent earlier this year. He also pledged more armoured vehicles and an increase in flights by unmanned surveillance aircraft.

At present the British force has three Reaper drones, although one is out of action after a crash landing, and a mix of Hermes 450 drones and tiny Desert Hawks. In total, 20 additional Ridgback armoured vehicles will be sent to join the 30 currently in Helmand. A better armoured Mastiff troop-carrier will be made available, and delivery of the new Warthog vehicle will be accelerated. In addition, Brown promised more helicopters.

All of these measures only presage continued hostilities and further bloodshed.

A number of unscheduled policy statements prompted media discussion in Britain on a possible UK exit strategy taking shape. Some predicted that Brown will want to announce the withdrawal of at least some of the UK's 9,000 troops in advance of next year's general election, due to the growing popular hostility towards Britain's military role in

Afghanistan. Others noted that Brown's trip to Afghanistan was even timed to spike a visit by Conservative leader David Cameron, planned since July, which the latter was forced to abandon.

But however important electoral considerations may be to the beleaguered prime minister and his deeply unpopular government, Britain continues to follow an agenda laid down by Washington that is likely to involve a continued and possibly even expanded military presence.

Brown said that the UK and the US would work towards a "big lift in the Afghan forces" as "the next stage of the post-election effort in Afghanistan." An additional 50,000 Afghan soldiers would be trained by November 2010, he declared, bringing present numbers up from 85,000 to 135,000. This brought forward previous targets by a year. With a further 100,000 to be trained by November 2011, the combined strength of all Afghan security forces, including the police, would then be 400,000.

"I think we can get another 50,000 Afghan personnel trained over the next year—stepping that up means the Afghans take more responsibility for their own affairs," Brown stressed. "They are backed up by the partnering and mentoring done by British forces."

Buttressing this accelerated drive to hand over responsibility to Afghan forces were official statements that the UK is actively seeking to open talks with Taliban leaders aimed at encouraging them to switch sides and collaborate with the US proxy government. "Peeling off" Taliban elements would involve bribery in the form of increased foreign aid and access to reconstruction projects in deals brokered by the military, as well as an amnesty for former fighters.

Government sources described engagement with the Taliban as an essential part of "national reconciliation." The

issue of negotiations with the Taliban was first broached by Foreign Secretary David Miliband in a speech at NATO headquarters in Brussels in late July.

All of Brown's pledges in fact imply the sending of additional troops rather than a withdrawal and were reportedly not cleared in advance with the Ministry of Defence (MoD), despite Brown's travelling with Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, the Chief of the Defence Staff. This prompted MoD officials to claim without foundation that deploying 200 specialists and training Afghan troops would not require an increase in UK forces. "There will be some rebalancing to make sure the 'top baseline' figure of 9,000 troops remains constant," an official said. Training the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) would be achieved by switching UK troops from combat operations to training, the official asserted.

Even with these denials, the only concrete statement on troop numbers was that the extra 700 troops from the 4th Battalion-The Rifles sent for the election in Afghanistan would be staying in Helmand for the immediate future.

Indicating the thinking within sections of the armed forces, the former commander of British forces in Afghanistan, Colonel Richard Kemp, commented that, "It's essential we get them [Afghan forces] trained to give us some sort of exit strategy," or there was a danger the mission would lose public support and "drift." But such an "exit strategy" is, to say the least, long term—spanning years—and subject to reversal, given the deteriorating situation on the ground.

In reality, both military and political conditions point to an escalation in the Afghan conflict.

The Afghan elections have proved to be a disaster. The latest results show President Hamid Karzai widening his lead over his leading opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, and edging closer to the 50 percent mark required to avoid a run-off. But this comes against a background of evidence of massive vote rigging and electoral fraud—the number of major fraud allegations has now doubled to 700—and continued and intense fighting and terrorist attacks. Of particular embarrassment to the UK was the revelation that just 150 Afghan voters dared to go to the ballot box in the Babaji area of Helmand province, where four of the ten troops who died in Operation Panther's Claw were killed.

Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, whose country holds the European Union presidency, was forced to state in a blog entry that it is "important that the election result that

is coming forth is seen as somewhat legitimate in Afghanistan itself, and that it can thereby provide a basis for political stability in the coming year at least." But this is merely wishful thinking, as is indicated by the emphasis now being placed on politically engaging with the Taliban.

Brown's comments are, above all, entirely in line with US policy and Washington's own rationalisations and accompanying justifications for a stepping up of the war. Before making his statements, the British prime minister held private discussions with General Stanley McChrystal, the US commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, although the talks pre-empted McChrystal's report due next month.

McChrystal supports training Afghan troops and an engagement with the Taliban, along the lines suggested by Brown, while demanding more troops in Afghanistan, not less. His report will not specify how many extra troops are needed for the neo-colonial war, but estimates range from between two combat brigades to as many as nine (10,000-60,000 personnel). More than 30,000 additional US troops have been sent to Afghanistan since May, doubling the American presence and increasing the Western total to about 100,000.

This will be accompanied by demands that other NATO states make significant further military contributions. The call for more troops at the very least militates against UK troop withdrawals and likely some additional troops would have to come from Britain.

McChrystal has stated that the aim should be for Afghan forces to take the lead, but their army will not be ready to do that for three years, and it will take much longer for the police. According to the BBC, he will also warn "that villages have to be taken from the Taliban and held, not merely taken."

Another report by McChrystal later in the year will make specific recommendations on troop numbers.



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