

Heavy US troop losses in insurgent attack in eastern Afghanistan

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The United States military suffered its worst single-engagement losses in more than a year and one of the worst in the eight-year-old war in Afghanistan on Saturday, when several hundred insurgents attacked a remote outpost in northeastern Afghanistan, killing eight American soldiers.

The attack began at daybreak and lasted for several hours. The target was an Afghan police station at the foot of a hill and a US outpost further up the hill, located in the Kamdish district of Nuristan province, about 20 miles from the Pakistan border.

In addition to the US deaths, two Afghan police were killed and, according to the local governor, 11 police were captured, including the district police chief. A local Taliban commander claimed responsibility for the attack.

Also on Saturday, two US troops were killed in central Wardak province when an Afghan policeman on a joint patrol opened fired on the Americans and fled. Three US soldiers were killed on Friday, bringing the three-day US death toll to at least 13.

The US troops in Nuristan province were scheduled to evacuate the outpost as part of a shift in military strategy to move forces from remote border areas controlled by the Taliban and other insurgents to more populated centers. Ironically, Saturday's attack coincided with the publication on Saturday and Sunday of front-page articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* detailing a similar debacle for the US in July of 2008 at a remote US outpost in the nearby village of Wanat.

Nine US soldiers were killed in that attack, which has been described as the "Black Hawk Down" of Afghanistan. Gen. David Petraeus, the head of the US Central Command, recently ordered a new investigation of the Wanat incident.

The deaths over the weekend brought the total number of US and NATO troops killed in Afghanistan this year to 399, and for the war as a whole to 1,444. Insurgents have killed over 200 occupation troops in the past three months alone, reflecting the deteriorating military and security situation for the occupation forces. The casualty rate for US forces is approaching that which prevailed during the worst of the

fighting in Iraq in 2006 and 2007.

The attack in Nuristan is certain to intensify tensions within the Obama administration, the military, and between sections of the military and the administration. It occurs as Obama is conducting a strategic review of US policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan involving his top military and national security officials.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the overall commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, whom Obama appointed last spring after firing the previous commander, at the end of August submitted a dire assessment of the US position in the country and is reportedly demanding up to 40,000 additional US troops. This would be on top of the 68,000 US soldiers who will be deployed by the end of this year as a result of Obama's order last February for 21,000 more troops to be sent.

In a breach of the principle of military subordination to civilian authority, McChrystal has been publicly campaigning for his policy, despite repeated statements by the Obama administration that it will not make a decision on troop levels until it has completed its strategic review. Last week, one day after a White House strategy meeting at which he participated by video link, McChrystal spoke before a think tank in London and categorically opposed alternate proposals to his call for a sharp increase in US troop levels and a full-scale counterinsurgency strategy that would focus on holding population centers and suppressing popular support for anti-occupation insurgents.

This would involve an intensification of violence against Afghan civilians. Before taking command of the war in Afghanistan, McChrystal commanded the secretive Joint Special Operations Command which organized assassinations and carried out the torture of detainees in Iraq.

On Friday, during his visit to Copenhagen to lobby for the 2016 Olympics to be held in Chicago, Obama met privately with McChrystal aboard Air Force One. No information has been released about the meeting.

According to media reports, elements within the Obama administration, led by Vice President Joseph Biden, have

opposed McChrystal's plan. Instead, they have proposed an alternate so-called "counter-terrorism" strategy, which would not involve a large increase in US troops in Afghanistan, but focus more on Taliban safe havens in Pakistan. The Biden plan reportedly would rely on air strikes, accelerated training of Afghan puppet forces and the use of US special forces troops to attack insurgents across the border in Pakistan.

Some leading congressional Democrats have come out in opposition to McChrystal's demand for a large increase in US forces, while most Republicans are backing the US commander. All sides, however, have made clear that they oppose a withdrawal of US troops, despite growing popular opposition to the war, and are committed to furthering the interests of US imperialism in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the wider region of Central Asia. Both the McChrystal plan and the reported Biden plan will mean increased military violence and repression directed against Afghan and Pakistani civilians.

The tensions and divisions within the Obama administration and the military-security apparatus found a somewhat clearer reflection on the Sunday morning talk shows. Retired Marine General James Jones, Obama's national security adviser, was interviewed on CNN's "State of the Union" program and CBS' "Face the Nation." Jones, who, according to media reports, is skeptical about McChrystal's "surge" policy, distanced himself from McChrystal and suggested that the US commander in Afghanistan was out of line in campaigning publicly for his plan.

Pressed by CNN moderator John King as to whether McChrystal's statements in London and elsewhere were "appropriate" and not "unseemly," Jones replied, "Ideally, it's better for military advice to come up through the chain of command and I think that General McChrystal and the others in the chain of command will present the president with not just one option, which does, in fact, tend to have a, you know, enforcing function, but a range of options that the president can consider."

Responding to a similar question on the "Face the Nation" program, Jones referred to McChrystal's proposal as "his opinion," and added, "The president should be presented with options, not just one fait accompli."

In his general remarks, Jones played down the question of troop levels, describing the present deployment as a "robust force" and stressing the importance of a "regional" strategy, linking this to a stepped-up campaign against Taliban safe havens in Pakistan. He also seemed to take issue with McChrystal's dire assessment of the current US and NATO position in Afghanistan, telling CNN's King that the "Al Qaeda presence is very diminished," and adding, "I don't

foresee the return of the Taliban and I want to be clear that Afghanistan is not in imminent danger of falling."

At the same time, he made a point of asserting the Obama administration's commitment to an indefinite military occupation of Afghanistan. "No one has suggested that we're about to leave Afghanistan," he told "Face the Nation" moderator Bob Schieffer.

In both interviews, Jones made clear that the US wants a quick resolution to investigations of massive vote fraud carried out by the puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai in last month's Afghan election. Jones said he expected the Afghan and UN-led election bodies to certify Karzai as the winner within ten days and that the US would endorse Karzai as the legitimate head of government.

Jones was followed on "Face the Nation" by retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, the former chief of the Central Command. Zinni gave unqualified backing to McChrystal and his proposed troop surge and warned the Obama administration not to delay a decision on US strategy in the region. "But I think we have to be careful how long this goes on," he said. "It could be seen not only out there in the region but our allies even as the enemy [sic] as being indecisive, unable to make a decision... I just don't understand why we're questioning that [McChrystal's] judgment at this point."

California Senator Barbara Boxer, who was prominent among Democrats presenting themselves as critics of the Iraq war during the Bush administration, followed Jones on the CNN program. She said that she had supported Obama's deployment of an additional 21,000 US troops to Afghanistan and indicated she was prepared to support the dispatch of more troops. "We've got to finish the business that we started," she said.



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