

Another costly week in Afghanistan

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As the Obama administration considers a request for the deployment of as many as 60,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, the current 100,000-strong US and NATO occupation force is continuing to suffer casualties at an unprecedented rate. In the week since eight American soldiers were killed in a major insurgent attack on a now abandoned base in the province of Nuristan, a further 10 troops have lost their lives and dozens have been wounded. The October death toll has already reached 29 and the total number of fatalities in 2009 stands at 408.

The rising casualties are due to the significant growth of the Taliban-led insurgency. The US military, as part of its campaign to press for a major surge of troops, estimated this month that the number of Taliban-aligned insurgents has grown from around 7,000 to over 25,000 in the past four years. The figure reportedly includes the thousands of fighters commanded by the Pashtun warlords and former US-financed, anti-Soviet mujahaddin leaders, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani.

It is now believed the Taliban have active guerrilla cells operating in 80 percent of Afghanistan and all of the country's major cities. Abdul Rahim Wardak, the Afghan defence minister, claimed on Saturday that at least 4,000 Islamist militants from Pakistan, the former Soviet Central Asian republics and North Africa were fighting alongside the Taliban.

The latest casualties include American, British, Polish, Spanish, Swedish and Australian troops. The majority were caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or landmines, which Afghan guerrillas are setting with increasingly lethal proficiency. Dozens of pro-occupation Afghan government soldiers, police and officials have also lost their lives or been wounded.

Four Afghan troops were killed on Sunday in the eastern province of Paktika. The governor and police commander of Shah Khil, a district in Paktika, were killed by an IED on Saturday.

An American soldier died Friday in an IED attack in an unspecified part of western Afghanistan, most likely Herat province. The same day, two Polish soldiers were killed in the eastern province of Wardak when their supply vehicle struck a mine. Another four soldiers were seriously injured. In the course of the eight-year war, 15 Polish troops have lost their lives. The Polish government has 2,000 personnel deployed in Afghanistan.

An Australian soldier was wounded on Friday in an attack in the southern province of Uruzgan. The Australian contingent in Afghanistan numbers 1,550. In the past two years, 10 have been killed and more than 80 wounded.

Lance Corporal James Hill became the 221st British death in Afghanistan when he was killed last Thursday by an IED. Insurgents had managed to rig a bomb along the track used by British troops to reach their practice firing range near Camp Bastion, the major military base in Helmand province. An investigation is reportedly underway into the security breach. Media reports have suggested that the explosive may have been set up by children, who were often permitted to enter the area to pick up expended brass cartridge cases. The 9,000-strong British force in Afghanistan has lost 84 dead and more than 300 wounded so far this year.

A joint patrol by Swedish and Finnish troops on the outskirts of the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, in Balkh province, was also ambushed on Thursday. Insurgents fired rocket propelled grenades and small

arms at their armoured vehicles. Two Swedes were wounded. Sweden has 430 troops in Afghanistan and Finland has 130. Until recently, there was relatively little insurgent activity in Balkh.

Last Wednesday, a seventh Spanish soldier died in Afghanistan in an IED attack in the western province of Badghis—an area, like Balkh, considered one of the “safer” parts of the country. The Taliban are now targeting the provinces in order to disrupt the NATO northern supply route through Central Asia, which is increasingly being used due to insurgent attacks on convoys through Pakistan.

The reality of an intractable and spreading insurgency that has broad popular support, particularly in the ethnic Pashtun southern and eastern provinces of the country, is fuelling the debate in Washington over alternatives to increasing troop numbers.

One option being considered is to seek a settlement with the Taliban on the proviso that it ends resistance and accepts the legitimacy of the US-backed regime in Kabul. Over the past week, Obama administration officials have downplayed years of US propaganda blurring the distinction between the Taliban and the Al Qaeda network. White House press secretary Robert Gibbs told journalists on Friday that there was “clearly a difference” and that the Taliban did not pose a “transnational threat”. Such statements point to the possibility of overtures to various Taliban factions and allies.

After eight years of fighting, however, the Taliban have little reason to accept any terms dictated by Washington. Militarily and politically, it is in the strongest position since the 2001 invasion. The August 20 presidential election in Afghanistan has been a debacle for the US occupation. Of some five million votes counted, as many as 1.5 million were likely fraudulent, primarily benefiting incumbent President Hamid Karzai. Across the Pashtun south, as few as 5 percent of the population voted, either because of support for or fear of the Taliban, which called for a boycott.

Two months later, no official result has been

announced while the White House ponders how to deal with the blatant election rigging by Karzai and his supporters. The senior UN representative in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, admitted on the weekend that there was evidence of “widespread fraud”.

If the Obama administration allows Karzai to claim victory, it will only fuel popular hostility toward what is nothing more than a puppet regime. If it insists on new elections, the poll cannot be held until after winter, allowing the Taliban to extend its influence. Whatever decision is made, US propaganda that its invasion has brought “democracy” to Afghanistan has been completely discredited.

The other dilemma facing Obama is where additional American troops for an Afghan surge would come from. While General Stanley McChrystal has reportedly asked for as many as 60,000 more personnel, as few as 15,000 are believed to be available for deployment over the next six months. Some 120,000 troops are still in Iraq and are slated to remain there until well after elections in January.



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