

US casualties rise as Obama prepares Afghan escalation

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Eleven US soldiers and three drug agents were killed Monday in two separate incidents in different regions of Afghanistan, as the Obama administration's war cabinet prepared to meet to consider escalating the war by sending tens of thousands of additional troops.

The most deadly of the incidents involved the crash of a large Chinook two-rotor troop transport helicopter in western Afghanistan, which claimed the lives of seven US soldiers and three civilian government employees, agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Another 26 US and Afghan personnel were wounded in the crash.

In a separate incident in Helmand province in the south of the country, a Huey helicopter and a Cobra helicopter gunship collided in midair, leaving four US troops dead and two others seriously wounded.

The fatalities marked the largest number of US troops killed in a single day since 16 soldiers died when Afghan fighters shot down a special forces helicopter in eastern Afghanistan in June 2005.

The Pentagon said it did not believe that the Chinook helicopter that crashed in western Afghanistan had been brought down by hostile fire, but that it was still investigating the incident. It did not specify where the crash had taken place, citing concern for an ongoing rescue operation. A spokesman for the Taliban said its fighters had shot the aircraft down during fighting in western Badghis Province.

"There was fighting in the bazaar between foreign troops and the Taliban," said the representative, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi. "During the fighting, the Taliban shot down a foreign helicopter."

A spokesman for the US military said that 12 insurgents had been killed in the operation.

The *London Times* quoted an Afghan eyewitness to the helicopter crash. Ahmad Farwad was quoted as saying: "There were four helicopters in the sky firing bombs and missiles. I was woken by the sound of fighting and I walked my family to another village. When we went outside we saw a helicopter had been shot down. The other helicopters were

attacking a Taliban compound near the bazaar and also hitting my neighbour's house."

This fighting began when US special forces troops, accompanied by the DEA agents and Afghan soldiers, carried out an air assault against a compound believed used by a Taliban-linked drug smuggler. The Chinook had been called in to pull the US forces out of the area following a firefight with Afghan resistance forces.

The raid appeared to be part of an escalation of counter-narcotics operations aimed at depriving the Taliban and other resistance groups of a major source of income.

Afghanistan produces 92 percent of the world's opium, which is used to produce heroin.

These operations are highly selective, however, as much of Afghanistan's drug trafficking is carried out by elements within the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai, with the collaboration of Afghan security forces.

The *Washington Post* reported Saturday that US military officials had compiled a hit list of 50 major drug traffickers alleged to have "proven links" to the insurgency. The military proposed to either "kill or capture" the individuals in what amounts to a program of targeted assassinations. The proposal provoked fierce opposition from within the US-backed regime however, apparently because of its own links to at least some of these traffickers.

Ahmed Wali Karzai, the president's brother and head of the Kandahar provincial council, has been accused of being a major force in the Afghan drug trade and other criminal enterprises.

Together with the spike in US casualties, there were also reports of new deadly attacks by American occupation troops against Afghan civilians.

US special forces troops killed four Afghans Saturday, including two women, a child and a young man who was to be married the next day. Two other women and another man were wounded in the incident, in which soldiers opened fire on a car for getting too close to an American military convoy. The fatal encounter took place in the Chawni area in southern Kandahar City.

In an incident on Sunday, US troops opened fire on civilians following a roadside bomb attack in eastern Laghman province. According to *Pajhwok Afghan News*, one civilian was killed and three others were wounded following the attack, which took place in Mehtarlam city, the provincial capital.

In a further indication of mounting tensions between the population of Afghanistan and the US and other foreign forces, demonstrators took to the streets of Kabul on both Sunday and Monday in an angry response to reports that occupation troops had set fire to a Koran.

In Sunday's demonstration, thousands of people, including many students from Kabul University, marched on the Afghan parliament, where they burned Obama in effigy and clashed with riot police. Police broke up a second demonstration Monday as it was forming in northern Kabul for a march into the city, reportedly using water cannon and firing live ammunition.

Spokesmen for US and NATO forces denied that any such incident had taken place and blamed the Taliban for spreading a false rumor. That the report is apparently widely believed, however, is a measure of popular hostility to the occupation.

These political upheavals further call into question the ability of the occupation forces and the Afghan puppet government to hold a November 7 runoff election to which Karzai agreed only after intense pressure from Washington. Karzai's challenger, his former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, raised the possibility of boycotting the election over the incumbent's refusal to dismiss election officials who organized massive ballot-stuffing in the first round last August.

President Barack Obama referred to the wave of US casualties in a speech delivered Monday afternoon to military personnel and their families at Jacksonville Naval Air Station in Florida.

"Like all those who give their lives in service to America, they were doing their duty, and they were doing this nation proud," he stated. "They were willing to risk their lives, in this case, to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for Al Qaeda and its extremist allies."

Whether the troops killed Monday believed they were risking their lives—and taking those of Afghans—to defeat Al Qaeda is unknown. The Obama administration, like the Bush administration before it, has provided this justification for the war. In doing so, it is attempting to quell the growing opposition of the American people with the claim that the US must suppress the resistance in Afghanistan or face the danger of another 9/11.

US military officials have acknowledged, however, that there are at most 100 Al Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan,

without any bases or infrastructure, much less the ability to stage terrorist attacks on the other side of the world. The pretense that the US must occupy Afghanistan indefinitely to prevent it from turning into a "haven for Al Qaeda" is nonsensical. The same rationale could be used to invade and occupy Somalia, Yemen and Sudan, not to mention Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Washington is pursuing strategic aims in Afghanistan that pre-date the attacks of September 11, 2001. Its aim is to use US military force to assert American hegemony over Central Asia and its immense energy reserves, together with pipeline routes that could deny such domination to its rivals in the region—Russia, China and Iran.

It is to that end that the Obama administration is prepared to sacrifice the lives of thousands of US troops and those of many more Afghans. The best means to achieve this strategic goal is what is currently under discussion in Obama's war cabinet, which met again Monday.

The financial cost of the US war is also ballooning. The Pentagon is presently allotted \$65 billion for maintaining the current deployment of 65,000 troops in Afghanistan over the course of the fiscal year. With the addition of each additional 1,000 US troops, the cost will climb by \$1 billion, according to the *Washington Post*. This means that implementation of the proposal of General McChrystal for 44,000 more troops would push the cost of the war up to nearly \$110 billion a year.

Moreover, unlike the Iraq "surge" ordered under the Bush administration, the increased deployment proposed by McChrystal is open-ended. With even the most optimistic military officials predicting five to 10 years of continuing combat in Afghanistan, the cost of the war will further inflate the US deficit, which will be translated into ever-deeper cuts in the living standards and social benefits of working people in the US.



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