

October the bloodiest month for US troops since Afghan war began

Bill Van Auken
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The deaths of eight more soldiers in two separate bomb attacks in southern Afghanistan Tuesday have made October the bloodiest month for US occupation forces since the war began in 2001.

With the month still not over, 55 US military personnel have been killed, more than a third of them in a 48-hour period. On Sunday, two soldiers died in a bomb attack. This was followed Monday with the crash of three helicopters—two in a midair collision and the third, a Chinook troop carrier, the result, according to the Taliban, of hostile fire. Eleven US soldiers and three agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration were killed in the crashes.

Tuesday's casualties were attributed by US military spokesmen to "multiple, complex" bomb attacks. Seven American soldiers and their Afghan interpreter were killed in Afghanistan's southern Kandahar province when a large bomb struck their armored Stryker vehicle and they were hit with small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades. The eighth soldier died in a separate roadside bomb attack in neighboring Zabul province.

The second biggest monthly death toll for US occupation forces came last August, when troops were deployed to provide security for Afghanistan's presidential election and 51 were killed.

Given plans to hold a November 7 runoff vote—in an attempt to erase the massive fraud in August's first-round election—it can be anticipated that next month will also see a heavy death toll.

The spike in US casualties comes as the Obama administration continues its month-long deliberations on the proposal submitted by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top US commander in Afghanistan, to send at least 40,000 more US troops to the war.

The White House confirmed that Obama has invited

the military's Joint Chiefs of Staff to the White House Friday to discuss the proposal and the impact that different levels of escalation will have on the military as a whole. It is not clear that the Pentagon has at its immediate disposal the additional 40,000 troops requested by McChrystal, and elements within the US military command have voiced concerns that this level of deployment, combined with the continued US occupation of Iraq, can strain the US all-volunteer armed forces to the breaking point.

"It's a chance to consult with uniformed military leadership as a part of his Af-Pak [Afghanistan-Pakistan] review," said White House spokesman Tommy Vietor of the Friday meeting. "The president wants to get input from different services."

There is increasing speculation in Washington that Obama will announce his decision on the war's escalation sometime between November 7, the day of the Afghan runoff election, and November 11, when he embarks on a nine-day Asian tour.

Senator John Kerry, the Massachusetts Democrat who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, voiced his conditional support for sending more troops to Afghanistan in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations Monday.

Fresh from a trip to Afghanistan in which he played the leading role in browbeating President Hamid Karzai into accepting a runoff against his chief challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, Kerry said that reducing the number of troops presently in Afghanistan and pursuing a "counterterrorism" strategy—a position attributed to Vice President Joseph Biden—was not viable.

"For now, we need the boots on the ground to get the information and protect our interests," he said.

Kerry went on to say that he "would support the President should he decide to send some additional

troops to regain the initiative” in Afghanistan, but stressed that the military escalation should be accompanied by “reform” of the puppet government in Kabul, more civilian development programs and accelerated training of the US-backed Afghan security forces.

McChrystal’s plan, he said, “reaches too far, too fast.” Kerry said he is “particularly concerned about the potential for us to be viewed as foreign occupiers,” while implicitly acknowledging that this has already taken place. “As our footprint has increased,” he said, “so has the number of insurgents.”

The thrust of Kerry’s speech was for a more limited escalation of the war, with McChrystal given fewer troops than he has requested. He suggested that the US military could limit its operations to “the southern and eastern theaters of Afghanistan,” the country’s Pashtun areas.

While such an option may be under consideration within the Obama White House, the Democratic administration is also under mounting political pressure from Republicans to accept McChrystal’s proposal without any alteration. In a television interview Sunday, his former rival for the presidency, Senator John McCain, charged that the US troops had been killed that day because “they didn’t have adequate support.”

As the debate continued over the level of escalation in troop deployments, a US government official responsible for one of the key provinces in Afghanistan released a resignation letter calling for an end to the US military intervention in the country.

Matthew Hoh, who submitted the letter, is a former Marine captain who became the senior State Department official in Afghanistan’s southern province of Zabul, where one of the US casualties occurred Tuesday.

Hoh wrote that while he had doubts about the proposed military strategy in Afghanistan, “my resignation is based not upon how we are pursuing this war, but why and to what end.”

The official, whose resignation was to be finalized today, stressed that the resistance in the Pashtun south of Afghanistan was not based on the Taliban, but consisted of numerous local groups.

“The US and NATO presence and operations in Pashtun valleys and villages, as well as Afghan army

and police units that are led and composed of non-Pashtun soldiers and police, provide an occupation force against which the insurgency is justified,” he wrote.

Hoh described official US justifications for the war as “specious.” If military occupation was required to prevent Al Qaeda from securing a safe haven in Afghanistan, he argued, by the same token the US should “invade and occupy western Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, etc.” The US presence in Afghanistan, he continued “has only increased destabilization and insurgency in Pakistan, where we rightly fear a toppled or weakened Pakistani government may lose control of its nuclear weapons.”

The *Washington Post* reported that US officials made extraordinary efforts to persuade Hoh not to resign and issue his public repudiation of the Afghan war. The US ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, offered him a senior position at the embassy in Kabul, which Hoh rejected.

He was then flown back to Washington for a meeting with Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, who likewise offered him a top post in his office, arguing that he would have more “political impact” if he tried to change policy from within.

While Hoh accepted the job, he resigned within a week. He told the *Post*, “I recognize the career implications, but it wasn’t the right thing to do.” He said he had decided to speak out publicly because “I want people in Iowa, people in Arkansas, people in Arizona to call their congressman and say, ‘Listen, I don’t think this is right.’”

In his interview with the *Post*, Hoh described himself as first and foremost a Marine, who was “never more happy than when our Iraq team whacked a bunch of guys.” No doubt, his resignation reflects deepening demoralization throughout the US military after eight years of occupation which have produced only a steady growth in armed resistance.



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