

US faces worsening military situation in Afghanistan

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The US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, used a speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London on October 1 to continue the Pentagon's campaign for more troops to be sent to Afghanistan. The Obama administration is currently considering a report by McChrystal requesting as many as 40,000 additional personnel.

Underlying the discussion is the worsening military situation facing the 100,000-strong occupation force. It does not have sufficient manpower to prevent a resurgent Taliban operating with relative impunity across much of the country. The insurgency has spread from the southern provinces that border Pakistan to the capital Kabul and northern provinces. The Bagram and Kandahar airbases are being targeted with rockets and mortars on a regular basis.

Vehicles operating on a key supply route into northern Afghanistan from Central Asia are now coming under attack. Insurgents captured and burned two fuel-laden trucks yesterday on the outskirts of the northern city of Kunduz—the same area where German troops called in air strikes on captured fuel tankers on September 4, resulting in scores of civilian deaths.

For perhaps the first time in the eight-year conflict, the Taliban will be able to continue intense guerilla attacks on the occupation forces during the harsh Afghan winter. Insurgent cells are now established in most of the major cities.

October has begun with the death of four occupation troops. Two American soldiers died Friday when a vehicle convoy was attacked by a suicide bomber. Another was killed in the eastern region of Afghanistan

in an ambush. In the south of the country, a British soldier died in a blast from an improvised explosive device (IED).

So far this year, 384 US and NATO troops have died in Afghanistan, pushing the total death toll in the war to 1,429—856 American, 219 British, 131 Canadian and 223 from other countries.

The casualty rate is beginning to approach that suffered by US forces in Iraq during the worst of the fighting in 2006 and 2007. Insurgents have killed over 200 occupation troops in the past three months alone, particularly with IED attacks on vehicles and well-laid ambushes.

Given the typical fatality-to-wounded ratio of 1:4, it can be assumed that at least 800 soldiers have been wounded-in-action (WIA) during the same period. Since the war began in October 2001, there have been 4,139 American and 875 British WIAs in Afghanistan. Testifying to the dramatic intensification of the war, 321 of the British wounded suffered this year, or more than a third, including 105 were assessed as “very serious” or “serious”.

From a military standpoint, the 17,000 extra troops sent by Obama earlier this year have had little impact. In July, a recently-arrived marine brigade, along with British forces, was sent into a much heralded offensive in one of the Taliban's strongholds, the southern province of Helmand. Three months later, the local governor estimates three quarters of the district is still controlled by insurgents.

The offensive has been waged with the predictable

brutality against civilians that has marked every counter-insurgency operation amongst a hostile population. On Wednesday, US troops called in an air strike against a housing compound after they allegedly came under fire. Locals reported that an entire family was wiped out, including four children, along with three Taliban fighters.

Other US reinforcements have done no more than bolster the beleaguered Canadian force, which has been sustaining casualties each month in its futile efforts to control areas around the southern city of Kandahar. In a sign of their frustration and demoralisation, the Canadian commander, Brigadier General Jonathan Vance, reportedly ranted at villagers this week following an IED attack that wounded a young soldier. He threatened to stop development projects if locals did not collaborate with the occupation and allegedly told them he wasn't sure the war "was worth another Canadian life".

While the US and European governments consider how to respond to the deteriorating conditions, they are placing heavy political pressure on the Pakistani government to launch a military offensive into South and North Waziristan—tribal agencies that border Afghanistan and are used by Taliban militants as a safe haven and training ground.

The agencies have been subjected to an economic blockade by up to 50,000 Pakistani troops and paramilitary since June. Over 128,000 civilians have fled, seeking sanctuary in towns and cities such as Tank and Peshawar. The Pakistani government has held off the military offensive, however, due to concerns over expected large losses. Estimates vary, but there are believed to be between 10,000 and 20,000 well-armed and well-entrenched tribal and Taliban fighters in the Waziristans.

If an offensive is going to be launched, it will need to take place over the next four to six weeks, before heavy snowfalls and freezing temperatures set in. A Pakistani officer told *Dawn*: "It will not be a walk-over. This is going to be casualty-intensive hard fighting. The nation will have to bear the pain."

In the interim, the US military is continuing to use Predator drones to launch attacks on alleged insurgent targets inside Pakistan's tribal agencies, in defiance of the opposition of the Pakistani people. Hundreds of civilians have been slaughtered and anti-American sentiment vastly inflamed. A strike on Tuesday on the housing compound reportedly killed five Taliban fighters.

Unnamed Pentagon officials told the *Washington Post* this week that US strikes might soon be carried out in Pakistan's western province of Balochistan as well as the tribal agencies. The US military has alleged that Taliban leaders are directing the Afghan insurgency from the city of Quetta, where large numbers of ethnic Pashtun Afghans have lived as refugees since the Soviet occupation of their country in the 1980s.

Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani analyst, told the *Post*: "Quetta is absolutely crucial to the Taliban today. From there they get recruits, fuel and fertiliser for explosives, weapons and food. Suicide bombers are trained on that side. They have support from the mosques and madrassas."

The Pakistani government has rejected the allegations and insisted that any US evidence should be provided to the Pakistani military to deal with. A US strike on Quetta would trigger protests and bitter political recriminations across the country, adding to the instability caused by eight years of US military intervention in Afghanistan.



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