Attack on UN in Kabul in lead-up to sham Afghan election

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An attack by Taliban fighters on a UN guesthouse in the Afghan capital, Kabul, has underscored the fragility of the US-led occupation of the country in the lead-up to the second round of presidential elections on November 7.

At least 12 people died in the raid on the Bakhtar Guesthouse yesterday morning, including six international UN staff, two Afghan guards and three Taliban gunmen. The brother-in-law of Gul Afgha Sherzai, the governor of the eastern city of Jalalabad, was also killed. At least nine other UN staff were wounded.

Three Taliban fighters dressed as police reportedly killed the two guards then entered the guesthouse compound and a 90-minute siege ensued. The raid was preceded by a rocket attack on the presidential palace and was followed by further rockets against the Serena Hotel, a five-star hotel frequented by foreign diplomats and journalists.

A Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, told the *New York Times* that the attack on the UN guesthouse was meant to warn people not to take part in the runoff election between incumbent president Hamid Karzai and his challenger Abdullah Abdullah. The UN is playing a major role in preparing the poll after the first round was ruled inconclusive amid massive electoral fraud on the part of both candidates.

The US and UN condemned the attack, which was the most serious on a UN facility in Afghanistan since the toppling of Taliban in 2001. While the UN presents itself as a neutral, humanitarian body, it functions as an adjunct to the US-NATO occupation in Afghanistan and is widely perceived as such by Afghans. In the name of "democracy", the UN is helping to stage the country's sham elections in an effort to politically bolster Washington's puppet regime.

The first round on August 20 was marked by flagrant ballot stuffing, ghost polling stations and interference by staff from the Afghan government's so-called Independent Election Commission (IEC). The turnout was only around 30 percent due to widespread popular disenchantment and hostility, as well as the threat of violence by the Taliban. Some 300 violent incidents were recorded on election day, in which at least 31 people were killed.

A drawn-out review of the results by the international Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), conducted against a backdrop of political wrangling in Kabul and Washington, found that a third of Karzai's votes and 200,000 of Abdullah's were fraudulent. Crucially, the ECC report released on October 18 dropped Karzai's result to just below the 50 percent level required to avoid a second round. After heavy arm-twisting by the Obama administration, Karzai finally agreed to a runoff.

However, the second round will be just as illegitimate as the first. While some staff changes have been made to the IEC, Karzai has rejected calls by Abdullah to replace IEC head Azizullah Ludin. Ludin made his sympathies clear in recent comments to the *New York Times*, declaring: "We will have a new election and will have the same results. Karzai is going to win."

The Brussels-based think tank, the International Crisis Group, concluded on Wednesday: "Unless steps are urgently taken to reform Afghanistan's electoral institutions, in particular to reconstitute the Independent Election Commission (IEC), there is little chance of reversing public disillusionment with elections… Barring sanctions against those at the highest-level responsible for

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the rigging and the swift adoption of extra security measures ahead of the run-off, it is more than likely that earlier missteps will be repeated."

Calls by the International Crisis Group and other commentators for the US and its allies to step in to patch up the electoral process only underline the neo-colonial character of the US-led occupation. The election is taking place under the tutelage of the US and the presence of more than 100,000 foreign troops. Whatever the outcome of the poll, the real decisions about the fate of Afghanistan and its people are made in Washington.

An article in yesterday's *New York Times* reported that the Obama administration was focussing on a strategy for Afghanistan that would boost US troop numbers to consolidate occupation control over 10 major population centres, including Kabul and regional cities such as Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-Sharif. Weeks of intense White House discussions followed a report by General Stanley McChrystal, the top US commander in Afghanistan.

According to the *New York Times*, while McChrystal is pressing for at least 40,000 extra US troops and extending protection to major Afghan agricultural areas and highways, Obama advisers are pushing for a more restrictive approach centred on the major cities. The remainder of the country would effectively be transformed into a free fire zone.

A senior Obama administration official told the newspaper: "We are not talking about surrendering the rest of the country to the Taliban." Military officers explained that US forces would maintain pressure on the insurgents by using surveillance drones and local reports to locate and destroy pockets of Taliban fighters, in particular by Special Operations forces. Efforts would also be made to expand Afghan security forces and attempt to buy off sections of the Taliban and its tribal allies.

Elements of the US military have been sharply critical of the Karzai administration from the purely pragmatic standpoint that its obvious corruption and incompetence have undermined support for the occupation and boosted the Taliban. Any announcement of the Obama administration's strategy for Afghanistan and increased troop numbers will likely be held off until after the election run-off and a new Afghan president is in place.

In neighbouring Pakistan, another car bomb blast yesterday wrecked havoc in a market in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, killing at least 101 people and injuring many more. The bombing is the latest in a series of high-profile attacks that have followed the launching of a large Pakistani army offensive into the tribal agency of South Waziristan on the border with Afghanistan.

The Obama administration has been pressing Islamabad to send troops into the border area, which has been used by anti-occupation insurgents inside Afghanistan as a safe haven. The offensive, involving 30,000 Pakistani troops, began on October 18 and has already resulted in whole villages being levelled and tens of thousands of refugees fleeing to safer areas. While not necessarily supportive of Islamist groups, broad layers of the Pakistani population are deeply resentful toward the US and regard the present government as little more than an American puppet.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton flew into Pakistan yesterday for a three-day visit aimed at bolstering the government of President Asif Ali Zardari and ensuring that its "war on terrorism" proceeds. Clinton denounced the Peshawar bombing and praised the offensive into South Waziristan, declaring it was "important for Americans to recognise the high price the Pakistanis are paying" in their fight against extremism.

Clinton's visit simply highlights the fact that Washington's reckless military adventure in Afghanistan has profoundly destabilised neighbouring Pakistan, with potentially dangerous consequences for the entire region.

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[26 October 2009]

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