

Four more US soldiers killed in Afghanistan

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Four US soldiers died in three separate incidents in Afghanistan on Monday, as President Barack Obama's "war council" is reportedly finalizing its plans to substantially increase the number of soldiers participating in the eight year old occupation.

In southern Afghanistan, two soldiers died in a bomb attack and a third perished in a separate fire with insurgents. A fourth soldier died in a bombing in eastern Afghanistan.

Elsewhere, a suicide bomber targeting a police convoy in the northern Kunduz province killed five civilians, three of them children. And on Sunday, eight Afghan soldiers were killed in two separate roadside bomb incidents in Helmand and Kandahar provinces.

The latest violence underscores the reach of the insurgency, which is now active across the breadth of this mountainous country.

Across the border, Pakistan's military offensive in South Waziristan is continuing. Pakistani officials claim that a Monday attack on Taliban positions killed 22 militants in a battle lasting several hours. Security forces bombarded the alleged Taliban fighters with tank and artillery fire.

Sixteen US soldiers have died in Afghanistan so far this month, down substantially from October's record toll of 58. However, this does not reflect a lessening of overall conflict in Afghanistan, but the onset of its winter, which restricts the movement of soldiers and supplies. In fact this was the occupation's bloodiest November to date, with 16 US and 28 total coalition deaths so far.

Hours after the latest casualties were reported, Obama convened a Monday night meeting of his war council to carry on discussions over how many thousands of additional soldiers to send to the war. Obama has said that he will announce his strategy for the Afghanistan war by year's end, but media accounts have suggested he may make public

his "surge" plan as early as next week.

US commander General Stanley McChrystal has openly campaigned for 40,000 more soldiers. He is reputedly supported by the head of the US Central Command, General David Petraeus.

Another faction, led by Vice President Joe Biden and the US Afghanistan ambassador, Karl Eikenberry (himself a former US commander in Afghanistan), favors an increase of 15,000 soldiers coupled with a counterinsurgency campaign relying heavily on special forces operations and drone attacks. This strategy would be coupled with pressuring Pakistan to carry out more intensive operations in its tribal regions that border Afghanistan.

A third grouping has coalesced around a troop increase of "30,000 or more," according to a *New York Times* military analysis published on Sunday. Reportedly backing this position are Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen.

The sharp tactical differences within the Obama administration and the military reflect the crisis facing the US occupation, for which American imperialism has no answer.

Yet in spite of the differences, all three options are predicated on an increase in US troop presence and military violence to new highs. Eliminated from discussion has been the maintenance of the occupation at current levels, let alone the option favored by the vast majority of Afghans and most Europeans and Americans—the total withdrawal of occupation forces.

Doubtless one aim of the internal debate, which has been heavily leaked to the media, is to prepare public opinion for a surge that may well come close to the 30,000-man-increase favored by Clinton, Gates, and Mullen.

Pressure is being brought to bear on the European powers to announce their own troop increases in advance of the looming US announcement, with the NATO command openly campaigning for the surge. Among the coalition force of just over 100,000, US soldiers currently outnumber troops from the other occupying powers by about two to one.

The European capitals have expressed vocal support for the war. But their commitment of soldiers, particularly for combat missions, has been more parsimonious. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has been campaigning for a combined additional commitment from NATO and non-NATO occupiers of 5,000 more soldiers, of which Britain will supply 500. So far, Slovakia and Bulgaria have offered to send small additional detachments. Italy has indicated it may leave 400 soldiers it sent as part of beefed up security for the August Afghanistan elections. Turkey may double its presence to 1,600 soldiers.

Yet even if other NATO countries are able to realize Brown's target of 5,000 more soldiers, the US increase will be somewhere between three and eight times as large.

One element of Obama's plans for Afghanistan has already begun without announcement: a program of organized bribery costing an estimated \$1.3 billion, developed by McChrystal. Following a tactic used to quell Sunni resistance in Iraq, US special forces have begun to support anti-Taliban militias in 14 or more parts of Afghanistan in a program known as the Community Defense Initiative (CDI). The program is set to expand dramatically in the coming months.

The initiative aims to "imbed" US special forces with non-Taliban armed groups—most of them existing in contravention of Afghan law—and give them training and intelligence. In return, US special forces will hand over large sums of money to the militias from a special military fund.

Details of the secretive program are being held back even from US coalition allies "who are likely to strongly protest," the *Guardian* reports. The CDI will not function within the NATO command structure, but will report directly to McChrystal.

McChrystal oversaw the implementation of the Iraqi version of CDI, where the "carrot" of out-and-out bribery was joined to the "stick" of a brutal campaign of assassination and torture.

The CDI program has been attacked by critics ranging

from Afghan government ministers to military analysts. "[T]he prospect of re-empowering militias after billions of international dollars were spent after the US-led invasion in 2001 to disarm illegally armed groups alarms many experts," the *Guardian* notes.

An unnamed senior NATO official in Kabul told the *Guardian* that in setting up CDI, McChrystal was looking for financial relationships "far less visible and unaccountable" by "simply paying out cash for them [Afghan militias] to defend their areas."

On Monday the US announced a much smaller program targeting Afghanistan's opium production, which is the basis for 90 percent of the world's heroin trade. The US embassy said it will award \$38.7 million to provinces that reduce their poppy production in the coming year.

Given the deteriorating state of US government finances, the cost of any surge in the war in Afghanistan will translate into further cuts to social spending in the US. Office of Management and Budget director Peter Orszag recently stated that an increase of 40,000 soldiers in Afghanistan would run up the annual war tab by around \$40 billion.

Democrats' Rep. David Obey of Wisconsin, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and Senator Carl Levin of Michigan have suggested that they may propose legislation for a "war tax" to pay for the Afghanistan war. Disguised as a progressive measure, Obey's plan would reportedly tax all households who earn less than \$150,000 a 1 percent "surtax," while for those earning more than \$200,000 it could be as high as 5 percent.

In the unlikely event that Obey's proposal would be implemented, it would in fact disproportionately hurt working class families who can ill afford further strains on their budgets. Moreover, since households earning over \$200,000 comprise less than 3 percent of the population, the war tax would in fact amount to a levy on the working and middle classes.



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