

US prepares Fallujah-style offensive in Afghanistan

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About 1,000 Marines attacked an area in southern Afghanistan controlled by insurgents on Friday, in the US-led occupation's first major offensive since President Obama announced that he would send 30,000 more soldiers to the war.

The attack on the largely abandoned city of Now Zad comes in preparation for an assault on a larger and more populous city, Marja, which the US military says is a center of Taliban resistance in Helmand province. The commander of the operation in Now Zad, Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson, said the model for the coming attack on Marja will be the US destruction of the Iraqi city of Fallujah, in 2004, in which thousands of civilians were killed. It is not clear when such an attack might take place.

On Friday morning, hundreds of soldiers were flown from the north into the Now Zad valley in Helmand province, while a second force moved on foot from the south in an offensive dubbed "Cobra's Anger." British forces launched an ancillary attack from the east. About 150 Afghan soldiers were reportedly attached to the operation, which involved helicopters and MV-22 Osprey aircraft.

ABC News footage showed unopposed US forces flattening buildings with heavy artillery fire. The pro-US governor of the province, Daood Ahmadi, said on Friday that so far the bodies of four Taliban fighters have been found as a result of the operation. (The Pentagon and the Kabul government routinely describe all those killed by US military operations as Taliban.) There were no reports of NATO casualties.

Coming only three days after Obama announced his 30,000 soldier "surge" to Afghanistan—most of which will be sent to the south of the country—the attack in Helmand is a precursor to the sort of operations that will take place in the coming years' fighting in Afghanistan. Cobra's Anger shows that Obama's war strategy will be characterized by

the use of overwhelming violence to terrorize and intimidate the Afghan population.

"There is no question that this is meant to be a signal to the Taliban in terms of what the Taliban can expect in upcoming days in terms of how this strategy will be implemented," said Steven Chao, *Al Jazeera* correspondent in Afghanistan.

The short-term tactical aim of the operation, military spokesmen claim, is to destroy Taliban "safe havens," to cut off north-south and east-west supply lines, and to root out "more than 100 hardline insurgents" from the Now Zad area.

The insurgents of Now Zad, though small in number, were able in the summer to entrench themselves in "positions so solid that a fixed frontline runs just a few hundred yards (meters) north of the Marines" in their Marines' Forward Operating Base, the Associated Press reports.

Neither the British, who were stationed in the area for years, nor the Americans have been able to hold Now Zad. "British troops who were once stationed there left graffiti dubbing the town 'Apocalypse Now-Zad,' a play on the title of the 1979 Vietnam War movie *Apocalypse Now*," according to the AP. "The British base was nearly overrun on several occasions with insurgents coming within yards (meters) of the protection wall. The area was handed over in 2008 to the Marines, who have struggled to reclaim much of the valley."

Before the US invasion in 2001, there were 30,000 inhabitants in the city of Now Zad, a center of poppy cultivation for the opium trade. Now, it is a "ghost town," and "virtually empty," according to press accounts.

Taking the Now Zad area is preparation for an assault on Marja, a large town in the region where many Afghans fled

in the wake of Marine attacks on their villages this summer—attacks that were made possible by Obama’s ordered dispatch of 21,000 more soldiers after his inauguration.

The Marines, including Gen. Nicholson, “have made no secret that, together with the Afghan national army, they plan to rout the Taliban from Marja in a sweep akin to that of the November 2004 battle of Fallujah, Iraq,” the *Los Angeles Times* reports.

“Marja is that last major sanctuary in Helmand province, the last place where the enemy has freedom of movement,” Nicholson told the *LA Times*. “We’re going to take that away from him.” Elsewhere Nicholson has called Marja a “cancer in Helmand.”

“Marja is much larger than Fallujah and split up with irrigation canals that will make troop and vehicle movements difficult,” the *LA Times* writes. “Also, it is heavily populated, raising the specter of civilian casualties if the Marines begin a vigorous house-by-house assault.”

Nicholson was a regional commander with the Marines when the US military attacked and destroyed Fallujah, during which thousands of civilians were trapped and subjected to an intense bombardment that included the use of the chemical weapon white phosphorus, which burns through clothing and skin on contact. The onslaught destroyed about 70 percent of the city’s structures.

Like Marja today, Fallujah was singled out because it was a center of resistance to the US occupation of Iraq. The horrific attack on the city, one of the great war crimes of modern history, served as a collective punishment to its residents and as an object lesson to the rest of Iraq, and indeed the world, in what becomes of those who resist the dictates of American imperialism. (See “Fallujah and the laws of war”.)

That the US military is openly preparing a Fallujah-style attack on Marja should be taken as a warning. In the coming years, the Obama administration’s “surge” will produce a bloodbath and war crimes in Afghanistan that will surpass those perpetrated by the Bush administration on Iraq. It is urgent that the working class in the US and other NATO countries mobilize against Obama’s offensive—and against those “left” forces who supported his election and now remain silent in the face of his administration’s crimes.

Obama has also recently authorized the Central

Intelligence Agency (CIA) to expand its use of Predator drone attacks in Pakistan, the *New York Times* recently wrote in a favorable piece on the destructive assassination program. The missile attacks have killed hundreds in the past two years—at least 400 by the CIA’s unofficial tally. The real figure is likely close to 1,000.

In gross violation of international law and the sovereignty of Pakistan, the drones carry out missile strikes against alleged Taliban and Al Qaeda supporters. The flights are operated from consoles resembling video game machines at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. While the US—which officially denies the existence of the attacks—claims that those killed are almost all Taliban or Al Qaeda, it provides not a shred of evidence to back up these assertions.

Washington’s stepped-up drone attacks and its dragooning of Islamabad into launching full-scale military operations against the tribes of its border regions have destabilized Pakistan and provoked a wave of terrorist attacks.

The latest of these came Monday when four militants using grenades and automatic weapons targeted a mosque used by Pakistan’s top generals at Friday prayers, killing 36 with guns and grenades before blowing themselves up. Among the dead were two generals and several other army officers.

The brazenness of the assault took Pakistan’s government and military brass by surprise. It took place in a highly fortified area of the city Rawalpindi, which is the headquarters of Pakistan’s military and a large suburb of Islamabad, and was the third such attack in Rawalpindi in two months. On October 10, a group of gunmen attacked army headquarters. A day-long battle ensued that killed 23, including the militants.

More than 400 have died in militant attacks across Pakistan since October.



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