

How many Afghans will die in Obama's war?

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In the media coverage of Barack Obama's decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan, one question goes unasked and unanswered: how many thousands, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilians will die as a result of US military aggression?

The dispatch of an additional 30,000 US troops, reinforced by at least 7,000 more from other NATO countries, means a colossal increase in the level of violence. By the time the Obama surge is complete, the size of the US military force in Afghanistan will be triple the number stationed there in the last years of the Bush administration.

In the cynical doublespeak of the Pentagon, the counterinsurgency warfare strategy developed by General Stanley McChrystal, the top US commander in Afghanistan, is aimed at "protecting the population" and "degrading the Taliban." What this means in practice is that those Afghans who resist foreign occupation will be considered to be Taliban and targeted for destruction.

The counterinsurgency doctrine developed in Iraq by McChrystal and the current head of the US Central Command, General David Petraeus, is not a military innovation, but rather the revival of the methods applied by American imperialism in Vietnam (as well as by France in Algeria and Britain in countless colonial wars). The largely rural population of Afghanistan is to be herded into large aggregations where they can be more easily controlled, especially in the country's major cities like Kabul and Kandahar, and those who resist will be classified as supporting the insurgents.

McChrystal also envisions a major incursion of US troops into the city of Kandahar itself, which is patrolled by Afghan government forces by day but dominated by Taliban forces at night. This could well mean house-to-house, Fallujah-style fighting in a city

of nearly 3 million people.

There is no doubt that as a result of the US escalation, the civilian death toll will skyrocket, although the American media is unlikely to report this honestly. Instead, those killed by American bombs, missiles, shells and other weaponry will be described as "Taliban," "terrorists" or, in the latest parlance, "bad guys."

The Obama administration has not bothered to provide a credible explanation for its decision to intensify the war. Obama, in his West Point speech, sought to hearken back to the days immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, although, according to Pentagon estimates, there are less than 100 Al Qaeda members still in Afghanistan.

With Al Qaeda an insignificant factor in the fighting, the US war effort will necessarily be directed at exterminating any Afghans who take up arms to oppose the occupation of their country by imperialist powers. Given the history of Afghan resistance to colonialism, going back more than 150 years, this means that virtually the entire population of the country, some 30 million people, are potential targets.

The targeted population is actually even larger, according to an analysis by Scott Shane of the *New York Times*, published Sunday in its "Week in Review" section. He notes that the US is potentially fighting a war against the entire Pashtun population living on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, 15 million on the Afghan side and 27 million on the Pakistan side. The combined population of Afghanistan and the Pashtun areas of Pakistan is 57 million—the equivalent of the population of France or Italy.

Up to now, there has been very little effort to account for the civilian death toll in the Afghanistan war. According to reports by independent monitoring groups, the systematic collection of data on civilian fatalities began only in 2007, six years after the US

invasion and overthrow of the Taliban. The UN has created a civilian casualty database but does not make it accessible to the public. Official semi-annual reports from the UN have placed the death toll at about 2,000 in both 2008 and 2009.

This figure, undoubtedly a gross underestimation, is bound to soar as the US military launches offensive operations in Taliban-held areas, which include much of the east and south, and scattered districts in every part of the country. Ground operations will be accompanied by the unleashing of massive firepower, including bombers, attack helicopters, remote-controlled missiles and artillery blitzes. The US and allied air forces will use new and more massive bombs, some of them big enough to vaporize every living thing in an area the size of a football field. The military is also redeploying new armored mine-resistant vehicles from Iraq, rebuilt for roadless Afghan conditions.

By the spring of 2010, the size of the US force in Afghanistan will be close to the 110,000 deployed by the Soviet Union at the height of Moscow's intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Counting the increase to 45,000 from NATO member states and other US allies, the combined imperialist forces will be 145,000, far larger than the Soviet presence.

This fact provoked questions to US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who appeared with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on three network television interview programs Sunday morning. Gates was second in command at the CIA during the 1980s and played a central role in funneling arms, money and recruits to the Afghan Mujahedeen fighting the Soviet military (an operation which enlisted, among others, Osama bin Laden and most of those who now constitute the leadership of the Taliban).

Gates was asked on several programs, based on his experience of the 1980s, how America would be successful in an Afghanistan war where the Soviet Union had failed. He replied each time that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan resulted in one million dead and five million people made refugees. But none of his interviewers bothered to ask him what the toll of deaths and refugees would be as a consequence of the current US escalation. It is likely to be in the same order of magnitude.

Lest this be thought an exaggeration, it should be pointed out that one million dead and five million

refugees is the most credible estimate of the human toll of the US invasion and conquest of Iraq. Now a military onslaught of the same dimensions is to be visited on the people of Afghanistan.

Such figures lead inexorably to one political conclusion: the escalation of the war in Afghanistan is a crime of historic proportions, whose perpetrators—Obama, Gates, Clinton, McChrystal, Petraeus, Vice President Biden, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mullen—are as guilty as their forerunners in the Bush administration, who devised and executed the bloodbath in Iraq.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has long advocated the war crimes prosecution of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld & Co. for the illegal invasion of Iraq. As a crime of equal proportions unfolds in Afghanistan, we call on working people and young people throughout the world to demand an end to the US-NATO war and the prosecution of all those responsible for planning and leading it.

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