

The human cost of the AfPak War

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The year 2009 ended as the bloodiest thus far of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and the associated Pakistani operations in tribal regions of North West Pakistan. Barack Obama, who postured as an opponent of the Iraq war during the 2008 presidential campaign, is now directly responsible for thousands of deaths.

In Afghanistan, the combined death toll among US and NATO personnel reached 522 by December 31, compared with 295 in 2008. The last deaths for the year included seven CIA operatives who died in a suicide attack on their base in Khost province, a British explosives expert killed in a bomb blast, four Canadians who lost their lives in a roadside bombing and an American soldier who was shot dead by his Afghan army colleague.

Total American fatalities stand at 319, twice as many as 2008. At least another 1,500 soldiers and marines have been wounded. Many have been sent home with horrific burns, missing limbs or severe brain trauma. Proportionally, the 9,500-strong British force suffered even greater casualties, losing 108 dead and more than 450 wounded-in-action. Thirty-two Canadians and 63 soldiers from other countries taking part in the occupation were also killed.

The Afghan army and police suffered the highest losses among the occupation forces. A precise figure for 2009 is not available, but, based on the weekly rate at which deaths are reported, it is likely that at least 1,000 police and more than 300 soldiers were killed.

The increased casualties are the result of the Obama administration's decision to order a major escalation of the war, with the stated aim of trying to stem the Taliban and other insurgent organisations. US troop numbers in the country rose to over 68,000 and several

major offensives were ordered into the Taliban-held areas of the southern provinces that border Pakistan. The US marines and British troops who were sent into battle in Helmand province suffered a significant proportion of the total occupation losses.

The increase in troop numbers and military operations did not bring about a lessening of the insurgency. Instead, its scale and scope dramatically intensified. This year, US and NATO forces were targeted by more than 7,200 improvised explosive devices (IEDs), compared with 4,169 in 2008. A NATO intelligence officer told Agence France Presse that the Taliban is now believed to run a shadow government in 33 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, with a core of about 25,000 to 30,000 fighters.

There is no official figure of the number of insurgents killed during 2009. In the course of an average week, however, military press releases generally claim between 20 and 150 deaths. It is likely that at least 2,500 anti-occupation fighters lost their lives this year.

Recruitment into the insurgent ranks has not slackened. According to NATO intelligence, the Taliban and other guerilla movements can draw on a base of up to 500,000 potential fighters. Among the population, there is widespread hatred for both the foreign occupation and the puppet government headed by President Hamid Karzai, who was allowed to blatantly rig the elections in August and hold onto power.

Obama's response to the Afghan resistance was to order the deployment of another 30,000 American troops. NATO countries will send another 5,000 to 10,000. By mid-2010, the US-led occupation will number over 150,000 military personnel, supported by

up to 150,000 private contractors. While most contractors are Afghan nationals performing non-combat supply and logistic roles, a significant number are highly paid and heavily-armed mercenaries carrying out explicitly military functions.

The main victims of the escalating war are the civilians on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The actual death toll this year—as a result of both US/NATO/Pakistani Army operations and their predominantly Islamist opponents—is masked by incomplete figures and a lack of independent reporting.

The UN estimates that at least 2,038 civilians died in Afghanistan in the first 10 months of the year, including as many as 150 killed in a US air strike in May in the province of Farah and 142 in the air strike called in by German troops in Kunduz province in September. Hundreds more have been killed in the two months since, including the 10 slaughtered last week by NATO troops in a remote area of Kunar province. At least eight of the dead were school children.

In Pakistan, military offensives to dislodge Pakistani and Afghan Islamist militants from the tribal agencies of Bajaur, Mohmand, Kurram, Orakzai and South Waziristan have left scores of towns and villages in rubble, displaced as many as one million people and caused unknown civilian casualties. In the Swat Valley, which was subjected to a massive assault in late 2008 and is still occupied by tens of thousands of Pakistani troops, death squads have murdered dozens of alleged Islamists.

Under Obama, the US military has dramatically escalated its own campaign of illegal assassinations in Pakistan's tribal regions, using Predator drones to kill suspected Taliban or Al Qaeda leaders and militants. In the process, numerous women, children and bystanders have been killed in what is routinely dismissed as “collateral damage”.

The US attacks and pressure on the Pakistani government to intensify military operations in the North West region is tipping the country toward all-out civil war. Islamist suicide bombings and other retaliatory attacks in major cities have killed over 500

civilians and wounded thousands since October. Popular opposition to US policy in Pakistan is overwhelming. There are also indications of bitter resentment and opposition in sections of the Pakistani military, despite its long-standing alignment with Washington.

Obama's surge in Afghanistan and his demand that Pakistan step up its assaults against the Taliban ensure that the death toll for 2010 will be even higher. The basic strategy of the US commander, General Stanley McChrystal, is to use the increased US military force to exterminate armed resistance on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border over the next 18 months.

This is not a war on terrorism or to assist the Afghan and Pakistani people, but an attempt to assert American dominance in the surrounding energy-rich regions. On behalf of the American ruling elite, Obama is determined to consolidate Afghanistan as a neo-colonial US protectorate and a staging post for further intrigues in Central and South Asia and the Middle East. To that end thousands of lives will continue to be squandered.



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