

Afghanistan: Record winter casualties for US-led occupying forces

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Last month, 44 US and coalition troops were killed in Afghanistan—the bloodiest month of fighting recorded in the country’s winter season since the 2001 invasion. In previous years, the freezing temperatures and snowy conditions have seen a lull in the conflict between the US and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and anti-occupation guerrillas.

In January 2009, there were 25 coalition troop deaths; in the same month in 2008, 14 deaths were recorded; while in January 2007 just two soldiers died. Last month’s violence followed record annual fatalities in 2009 for the occupation forces—520, compared to 295 in 2008.

The upsurge reflects escalating opposition among ordinary Afghans to the foreign occupation and the rule of Washington’s stooge, President Hamid Karzai. President Barack Obama’s unfolding troop “surge” has also led to more clashes. An additional 37,000 US and coalition soldiers are due to arrive in Afghanistan by August 2010, bringing the total number to more than 150,000, not counting private contractors and mercenaries. Obama’s escalation of the war is aimed at suppressing all resistance within the Afghan population in order to shore up Washington’s control over the country and its geo-strategic interests in the oil- and gas-rich Central Asian region.

Of the 44 foreign forces killed last month, 29 were American. Others were from Britain (6), France (3), Canada, Norway, Denmark and Spain. The majority died in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, on the southwest border with Pakistan. According to statistics maintained by the web site *icasualties.org*, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) accounted for 70 percent of the deaths.

A briefing prepared last December by Major General Michael Flynn, the senior US intelligence official in Afghanistan, noted the growing importance of IEDs in the war. In an article published January 25, CNN reported: “The

explosives do for the Taliban what surface-to-air missiles once did for the Afghan mujahedeen fighting the Soviets—somewhat equalise the fight against a superpower, Flynn says.”

The growing number of IED attacks will inevitably deepen the crisis of morale afflicting US and coalition forces. Frontal insurgent attacks are met with massive firepower, including helicopter, drone and fighter plane bombing raids that frequently destroy entire buildings and sections of towns and cities. Responding to IEDs is a different question. The US-led troops are engaged in an unending colonial-style war, confronting a largely unseen enemy that enjoys the support or acquiescence of the civilian population.

Flynn’s intelligence report noted the growing number and strength of IEDs. In May 2008, most bombs weighed less than 25 pounds (11 kilograms), whereas now more than three-quarters weigh more than 25 pounds. The nature of the IEDs has also changed. Previously they were mostly adapted military ordnance such as shells, but now an estimated 85 percent are made from ammonium nitrate, a common fertiliser. Flynn’s briefing stated that Pakistan is the primary source of the chemical, with China and Iran “also significant suppliers”.

According to CNN, President Karzai last month outlawed the “use, production, storage, or sale” of ammonium nitrate.

Flynn reported that “security incidents”—including IED attacks, ambushes, mortar fire and missile strikes—typically numbered 500 a week in the second half of 2009, compared to an average of less than 40 in 2004. Only a small fraction of the escalating attacks are ever reported in the US and Western media. The intelligence official concluded his briefing by noting that the insurgency was “increasingly effective” and could “sustain itself indefinitely”. He reported that the Taliban now has “shadow governors” in 33 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, up from just 11 in 2005.

Insurgents are combining increasingly effective IED and other guerrilla attacks on foreign forces with high-profile assaults on Afghan government buildings. On January 18, Taliban suicide bombers and fighters armed with grenades and other weapons paralysed the capital, Kabul, for more than five hours before US military and Afghan security forces regained control.

Insurgents launched a similar operation on January 29 in Lashkar Gah, the regional capital of Helmand. Six militants armed with suicide vests and machine guns were reported killed after launching an assault from a hotel near an army barracks at 10 am. Fighting lasted more than seven hours, during which residents of the city were advised to stay at home, before government forces, British soldiers, and NATO helicopters were able to repulse the attack.

“I was in my shop when I heard the loud noises from the fighting,” Haji Mohammad Karim told Associated Press. “We all closed our stores and went home. The city was like a ghost town. The only people on the streets were security forces.”

Like the Kabul offensive, the Taliban’s operation in Lashkar Gah highlights the Karzai administration’s extremely tenuous control over the country. For the US and NATO forces, it again raises questions regarding insurgent infiltration of the pro-government security forces. President Obama and his international allies have made any drawdown of foreign troops conditional on the organisation and training of a local military and police proxy force. But the demoralised rag-tag forces so far assembled have proven highly vulnerable to penetration by militants.

US and coalition forces face growing danger from within the ranks of their Afghan colleagues. The killing of seven CIA operatives in a suicide attack late last year by a Jordanian posing as a US intelligence asset was the most prominent of a series of security incidents. On January 29, two US soldiers were shot dead by their Afghan interpreter at a military outpost in the eastern part of the country. The interpreter was then killed by other US troops. Military officials attempted to downplay the incident, telling the *New York Times* that the Afghan acted out of “personal motives” and was a “disgruntled employee”.

Ordinary Afghans continue to be killed in record numbers. Last year, at least 2,412 Afghan civilians were killed according to UN figures, which most likely significantly underestimate the real toll. On January 28, a US gunner shot

dead an imam outside a mosque in Kabul. Witnesses said that 36-year-old Mohammed Yonus was driving his car with his seven-year-old son and other children when he stopped before an American convoy. Fourteen bullets were reportedly fired, with four hitting the cleric. The killing occurred near the site of a suicide attack on an American convoy that injured eight soldiers earlier in the week.

A brief protest of local people erupted before elders called it off, fearing a clash with government security forces. “A lot of innocent people have been killed by the Americans,” Shabaz Khan, a 20-year-old student told the *Washington Post*.

In another incident on January 29, two civilians were killed and another badly injured when US troops fired into their car at a checkpoint in the southeastern Ghazni Province.

On January 30, four Afghan soldiers were killed by “friendly fire” after a joint US-Afghan special forces unit opened fire on an Afghan Army checkpoint in Shinz village, west of Kabul, and then called in helicopter gunship support.

Amid the deepening crisis confronting the occupying forces, there is no indication that the plan outlined at the January 28 International Conference on Afghanistan held in London—to buy off Taliban militants with cash drawn from a designated \$650 million slush fund—is likely to work. In a statement released last Saturday, the Taliban leadership denied that its representatives had earlier met with UN envoy Kai Eide and said such reports were “mere futile and baseless rumours”.



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