

Offensive looms in Helmand province

US military noose tightens on Afghanistan town

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Thousands of US Marines and Army troops have moved into position on the outskirts of Marjah, a town in central Helmand province, identified publicly by the Pentagon as the first major target of the offensive authorized by President Barack Obama.

The town is the largest population center under Taliban control and has been dubbed a “Taliban stronghold” in the US media in order to excuse in advance what are likely to be massive civilian casualties. Press reports citing military sources claim that up to 1,000 “militants” are making a stand in Marjah, lacing the roads and fields with land mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

US officials described the attack as “the biggest offensive of the nine-year war,” and portrayed the impending battle as a turning point. The town was briefly occupied by British troops last spring, an attack whose purpose was to prevent a Taliban offensive against the Helmand provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, 25 miles to the northeast. The farming and market town was abandoned soon after capture because there were too few Afghan forces available to garrison it.

This time the intention is to seize the town and eliminate the Taliban presence in the surrounding district of Nad Ali, which has a total population of about 80,000. A massive force of some 15,000 US, British, Canadian and Afghan puppet troops has been mobilized for Operation Moshtarak (Operation Together in the local language), approximately 15 times the number of Taliban fighters said to be in the area.

Reports in the British press, beginning with the *Sunday Times* of London February 7, claimed that British SAS troops, the equivalent of US Army Rangers or Navy Seals, had been sent into the area around Marjah and had killed as many as 50 Taliban commanders. “Special forces guys have been going in on assassination missions with the aim of decapitating the Taliban force,” the *Times* reported. Leaflets naming some of the murdered men were then air-dropped over the town, in an effort to demoralize the Taliban

fighters, although most cannot read.

British troops were said to be positioned directly north of Marjah, while soldiers in the US Army’s 5th Stryker Brigade and Marines were northeast of the town, moving down from Lashkar Gah, accompanied by Afghan puppet troops led by Canadian “advisers.” Another unit of Marines was moving on the town from the east, securing crossing points along the Helmand River.

Press reports said that Marines came under sniper fire beginning Tuesday, February 9, and that Cobra attack helicopters had been called in to suppress it.

The Marines have deployed the new Assault Breacher Vehicle, a 72-ton vehicle built to be relatively impervious to land mines and smaller IEDs, combining the functions of tank and bulldozer. The ABV is equipped with a 15-foot blade that plows 14 inches deep—detonating mines and also destroying fields. It also carries a rocket-fired linked-charge made of high-powered C4 explosive, which can blow up an entire minefield.

Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson, commander of the Marines in southern Afghanistan said of Marjah: “This may be the largest IED threat and largest minefield that NATO has ever faced.”

The Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* carried an interview with a Taliban commander in Marjah, who said that the initial resistance his forces would engage in would be guerrilla warfare. “We are men from the villages, we know the area, we can hide our guns in the village and we can use them again when we have the opportunity,” he said. “The operation will not be successful.”

The International Committee of the Red Cross warned February 10 that “the current upsurge in military operations in Helmand... has resulted in a marked increase in the number of casualties requiring emergency medical treatment.” It added, “Staff working at the ICRC’s first aid post in Marjah have been seeing increasing numbers of war casualties.” Local officials in Helmand province said that

fewer than 500 families have fled to escape the fighting, and that the bulk of the civilian population was still in their homes.

US officials have given repeated warnings of the offensive, naming the town they are targeting. While the American media has made much of these warnings, presenting them as an extraordinary effort to alert the population and avoid civilian casualties, there have been conflicting signals. Afghan Interior Minister Hanif Atmar said the population should be encouraged to flee, but US and British commanders have urged residents of Marjah to stay in their homes.

The *Washington Post* gave another reason for the advance notice, reporting, “U.S. and NATO commanders contend that telling Afghans that the operation is imminent also could help prevent Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who gave his approval for the mission two weeks ago, from backing down in the face of pressure from tribal chieftains who have profited from Marjah’s drug industry.”

As with most military operations in Afghanistan, with or without media announcements, the offensive against Marjah would not be a secret to the Taliban guerrillas, who are based among the people in the area and can see and feel the impact of the efforts by US and NATO forces to prepare the battlefield.

The real attitude of the American and other imperialist forces towards the local population can be seen in a report carried Thursday in the *Wall Street Journal*, describing US military operations in the Pashmul area of Kandahar, the province immediately to the east of Helmand, and another major center of guerrilla opposition to the US-led occupation.

The article carries the blunt headline, “New Battles Test U.S. Strategy In Afghanistan:

Focus on Safeguarding Civilian Lives Frustrates Troops in Taliban Territory.”

It goes on to describe the mounting hostility of rank-and-file US soldiers and lower-ranking officers to the restrictions being placed on their use of firepower, in the name of reducing civilian casualties.

“Across southern Afghanistan, including the Marjah district where coalition forces are massing for a large offensive, the line between peaceful villager and enemy fighter is often blurred,” the *Journal* article reports. “American troops have dubbed Pashmul, a cluster of villages sprawling across the fertile belt of grape and poppy fields west of Kandahar city, ‘the heart of darkness.’”

The newspaper cites the estimate by the local US commander, Captain Duke Reim, that 95 percent of the local population are either Taliban themselves or help the Taliban.

“People here are on the side of the insurgency and have no trust in the government,” District Gov. Niyaz Mohammad Serhadi told the newspaper. “Insurgents are in their villages 24 hours.”

The report continues: “Since assuming command of coalition troops last summer, U.S. Gen. Stanley McChrystal curtailed airstrikes, limited house searches, and put the onus on winning the population’s trust. Forgoing some attacks on the Taliban to spare Afghan civilians, the counterinsurgency theory goes, would eventually convince the local population to side with the U.S.-led coalition and Afghan authorities. In the meantime, however, new restrictions on American firepower can also exact a steep toll in American lives—and give the Taliban a tactical advantage.”

The *Journal*, voice of the most right-wing militarist faction of the US ruling elite, clearly objects to such restrictions on slaughtering the natives, and its reporter found similar feelings in the military ranks:

“Among front-line troops, many of them used to more liberal rules of engagement in Iraq, frustration is boiling over. ‘It’s like fighting with two hands behind your back,’ says Sgt. First Class Samuel Frantz, a platoon sergeant in Capt. Reim’s unit, the Charlie Company of the 1st Battalion of the 12th Infantry Regiment. ‘We’re so worried about not hurting the population’s feelings that we’re not doing our jobs’.”

Such sentiments are the predictable byproduct of the escalating resistance to the occupation of Afghanistan by the most powerful imperialist military force. These sentiments lead inexorably to the perpetration of Vietnam-style atrocities, in towns and villages that will become the Afghan equivalents of My Lai.

Meanwhile, the casualties among the occupiers will continue to rise, alongside the higher, but relatively unreported, death toll among the occupied. An explosion blasted a joint Afghan-US combat post in the eastern province of Paktia Thursday, injuring several US troops.

The *Guardian* newspaper reported Wednesday that British hospitals have been warned to prepare for the “very real risk” of increased casualties among troops participating in the Helmand offensive. It cited a National Audit Office report detailing growing strain on British medical facilities, including the possibility that some British hospitals would have to displace civilians to make way for more military patients.



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