

As US death toll hits 1,000 in “Operation Enduring Freedom”

# **Congressional Democrats back expanded war in Afghanistan**

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The US House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly Wednesday evening against a resolution to end the war in Afghanistan and begin a withdrawal of US troops within 30 days. The roll call vote, with only 65 in favor and 356 against, showed top-heavy majorities of both Democrats and Republicans opposing an early end to the war.

House Democrats voted against the resolution by 189 to 60, House Republicans voted against by 167 to 5. The leaders of both parties lined up in unanimous opposition to the resolution, which would have invoked the 1973 War Powers Act. This provides that the president can send US armed forces into war abroad only with the authorization of Congress or if the US is already under attack.

The measure, introduced by a handful of liberal Democrats led by Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, would have had no effect even if it had passed, since the bill would still require Senate passage and then face a certain presidential veto.

Moreover, the bill would have allowed President Obama to keep US troops in Afghanistan through December 31 if he determined this was necessary for “national security.” In other words, the deadline set by the “antiwar” resolution is only seven months earlier than the nominal deadline announced by Obama in his speech last December, when he claimed that some US troop withdrawals would begin by July 2011.

The perfunctory debate and swift defeat of the resolution were a demonstration of the enormous gulf between the great mass of American people and the representatives of big business who comprise the congressional delegations of both parties.

A majority of the American population opposes the war in Afghanistan and wants it to end as soon as possible. But even a symbolic gesture in the direction of this mass antiwar sentiment finds little support in Congress.

Despite the toothless character of the congressional opposition, there was an effective media blackout on even the most tepid criticism of the escalating US military operations in Afghanistan. There was no reporting of the debate or vote on the network newscasts, although the roll call ended just after 6 p.m.

There were only two reporters sitting in the press gallery during the debate, a fact taken note of and denounced by one congressman, Democrat Patrick Kennedy of Rhode Island, who is retiring from Congress and may thus feel less politically constrained.

The House vote came two days after the Pentagon reported that the death toll among US troops engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom, the official title of the Bush-Obama “war on terror,” has passed the 1,000 mark. Of these, about 930 were killed in the course of operations in Afghanistan, with the balance consisting of soldiers killed in a dozen other countries, mainly in accidents, where they were deployed allegedly against Al Qaeda—including Yemen, Somalia the Philippines, and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Of the 930 deaths in the Afghanistan theater, which includes Uzbekistan and Pakistan, some 726 are classified as combat deaths, with the rest due to helicopter and plane crashes, weapons malfunctions and disease. More than 5,000 US soldiers have been wounded, more than half of them severely enough to require evacuation from the war zone.

The US death toll in Afghanistan has risen rapidly

over the past year, and according to an analysis of the deaths over the last three months, one third of those killed had previously been deployed in Iraq. US troops are being killed this year at the rate of slightly more than one per day.

According to the tabulation by icasualties.org, the US death toll rose from 117 in 2007 to 155 in 2008 and doubled to 316 in 2009. In the first two months of 2010, another 70 US soldiers have been killed. The US-led NATO forces have lost another 670 soldiers since the war began in November 2001, including 272 from Britain and 140 from Canada.

Casualties among the occupying forces have been concentrated in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, with 671 deaths in those two provinces alone, the heartland of Taliban resistance, nearly 40 percent of the combined US-NATO losses.

The death toll among Afghan civilians and guerrilla fighters opposing the US occupation is far less accurately tallied, but undoubtedly amounts to tens of thousands.

The House vote to uphold the Obama administration's escalation of the war coincides with a visit to Afghanistan by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who met with the puppet president Hamid Karzai in Kabul, then toured Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the south, the focus of the US escalation.

Gates met with US troops at a base just north of Kandahar, Afghanistan's second-largest city, which is to be the target of a major US offensive in the coming months. He told them they would play a lead role in that offensive, declaring, "Once again you will be the tip of the spear."

The 800 soldiers in the Stryker battalion have suffered 21 dead and 62 wounded, a casualty rate of 10 percent, in heavy fighting against entrenched Taliban forces in the rural area outside the city.

An equivalent casualty rate for the 30,000 troops ordered into Afghanistan by Obama would mean 750 dead and 2,250 wounded just among the new forces, not counting the casualty toll among the nearly 100,000 US and NATO troops already deployed.

According to press accounts, Gates and Karzai discussed the details of the coming offensive into Kandahar with General Stanley McChrystal, the top US commander in Afghanistan. McChrystal told reporters

that the military operations in Kandahar would be conducted differently than the recent offensive against Marjah, in neighboring Helmand province.

Unlike Marjah, a largely rural area, Kandahar is a large city of an estimated 900,000 people, where Taliban forces operate covertly rather than openly, at least in the daytime. McChrystal said that only 6,000 of the 30,000 troops ordered in by Obama have arrived and moved into position. The Kandahar operation would require several more months of preparation.



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