

# Afghanistan violence escalates as US forces prepare Kandahar assault

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Intensified clashes between US-led occupying forces and Taliban and Afghan resistance fighters have seen a substantial increase in casualties for both sides, and a rising death toll for local civilians. Helmand and Kandahar provinces, on Afghanistan's south-western border with Pakistan, remain the focus of Washington's military escalation. Having captured Marjah town in Helmand last month, US military commanders are waiting for the remainder of the 30,000 additional troops deployed by President Barack Obama before launching a summer offensive in Afghanistan's second largest city, Kandahar.

Last Saturday, Taliban forces in Kandahar launched one of their largest coordinated attacks. According to the Afghan interior ministry, multiple explosions, including four reported suicide bombings, killed 35 people and injured 57. Kandahar's prison and police headquarters were the primary targets, with 13 police officers among the dead. Civilians were also reportedly killed, including six women and three children at a wedding celebration being held in a hall next door to the police headquarters. Afghan authorities claim that they found eight suicide vests, three rockets, and AK47 ammunition at the prison. Taliban fighters apparently unsuccessfully attempted to storm the facility, as they did in June 2008 in a coordinated attack that freed more than 1,000 people.

The Taliban declared that Saturday's operation was in retaliation for recent comments by US commander in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, concerning preparations for an attack on Kandahar. "General McChrystal has said that soon they will start their operations, and now we have already started our operations," spokesman Yousef Ahmadi said. "With all the preparations they have taken, still they are not able to stop us... This was to sabotage the [US] operation and to show we can strike anywhere, anytime we want."

More than eight years after the US-led invasion, the

inability of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to maintain control over Afghanistan's second largest city demonstrates the continuing crisis confronting the occupation.

The *Washington Post* reported Sunday: "In theory, the Afghan government is in place in Kandahar, but its authority is nominal. Bombings and assassinations have left the government largely isolated behind concrete barricades and blast walls... The provincial council has trouble convening because many members have fled to Kabul. The police are viewed as ill-trained, corrupt and possibly in league with criminal gangs. If Kandahar city is sliding into lawlessness, the surrounding province appears in even worse shape. In the city, the government has retreated behind concrete barricades; in much of the countryside, there is no government presence."

In reality, US puppet President Hamid Karzai and his assorted coalition of ex-warlords, drug traffickers, and mafia types have little authority beyond the capital, Kabul, and even there anti-occupation forces now operate with increasing confidence.

While the US military is preparing to step up military operations once the "surge" is completed, the violence has already escalated. Unlike previous years, the 2009–2010 winter has seen no real lull in the activities of anti-occupation forces. As a result, the *icasualties* monitoring website has reported that the International Security Assistance Force death toll for February was more than twice that of the same month last year—55 dead compared to 24 for 2009. Already this March, 21 foreign troops have so far been killed, compared to 28 for the whole of the month in 2009.

General David Petraeus, head of the US Central Command, yesterday warned that Americans should expect "tough fighting and periodic setbacks". He told the Senate

Armed Services Committee: “The going is likely to get harder before it gets easier.”

Many of the latest casualties are caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). According to the US army’s Joint IED Defeat Organisation, the number of concealed bombs planted in Afghanistan has been doubling every year. In 2009 they were being produced at a rate of 22 a day. Typically comprising explosives made from fertilisers and triggered by crude pressure or trip-wire triggers, the IEDs have a low metallic content making them difficult to detect.

Coordinated ambushes, and mortar and rocket attacks are also increasing. Last Monday one ISAF member, whose nationality has not yet been released, was killed during a rocket attack on Bagram Airfield, the largest military base in Afghanistan. Also among the recent casualties was 26-year-old US Corporal Jonathan Porto who was killed in Helmand Province last Sunday. According to media reports, Porto joined the Marines two years ago after he could not find a job. Deployed to Afghanistan last December, he is now survived by his wife and a two-month-old daughter who he never met.

Afghan civilians remain the primary victims of Obama’s criminal war of occupation. Massive air strikes continue to inflict enormous damage on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In the latest incident, an unmanned US drone fired missiles into a building about 40 kilometres west of Miranshah, the main town in Pakistan’s North Waziristan tribal agency. Ten “militants” were reported killed, with information about civilian casualties yet to emerge.

In the recently captured area of Marjah, several reports have emerged of US forces and their Afghan proxies confronting a hostile population. Remaining Taliban forces in hiding have threatened reprisals against residents who collaborate with the foreign troops. “We are in a very critical situation right now,” an unnamed US military advisor attached to Afghan security forces in Marjah told *Stars and Stripes*. “The Taliban are reorganising. The capability they lost two weeks ago is coming back.”

Sharp tactical divisions are emerging within the military and official foreign policy circles over how to proceed.

The Marjah operation has come under criticism as a wasteful diversion. The *Washington Post* reported on Sunday that “some senior officials at the White House, at the Pentagon and in McChrystal’s headquarters ... question whether a large operation that began last month to flush the

Taliban out of Marjah, a poor farming community in central Helmand, is the best use of Marine resources”. The *Post* noted that the operation would most likely tie down two Marine battalions and hundreds of Afghan security forces for months. “What the hell are we doing?” an unnamed senior Obama administration official said. “Why aren’t all 20,000 Marines in the population belts around Kandahar city right now?”

Similar questions were raised in the *Foreign Policy* magazine by Thomas H. Johnson, director of the Program for Culture and Conflict Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School, and M. Chris Mason, a senior fellow at the Center for Advanced Defense Studies. Describing Marjah as a “strategically meaningless village”, the authors insisted that “taking this nearly worthless postage stamp of real estate has tied down about half of all the real combat power and aviation assets of the international coalition in Afghanistan for a quarter of a year”. Johnson and Mason derided US plans in Marjah as efforts to “establish an Afghan Potemkin village”, and concluded that the operation was “essentially a giant public affairs exercise, designed to shore up dwindling domestic support for the war by creating an illusion of progress”.

These strident statements indicate the frustration building in American ruling circles. The Afghanistan war was aimed from the outset at securing US domination in the strategically and economically vital Central Asian region. Defeat would open the door to rival powers in Europe and Asia and represent a major blow to Washington’s efforts to maintain its global dominance. The Obama administration has responded by preparing a massive show of force, including, if necessary, unleashing devastation on Kandahar on a scale similar to that inflicted on the Iraqi city of Fallujah in late 2004.



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