Obama's visit underscores US crisis in Afghanistan

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Sneaking in and out of Kabul under the cover of darkness Sunday, President Barack Obama's trip to Afghanistan only underscored the crisis confronting the US in the midst of the war's current escalation.

Like similar trips to US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan staged by former President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, Obama's flight to Kabul was organized under conditions of extraordinary secrecy, with even Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai, ostensibly the country's sovereign ruler, kept in the dark about the visit until the last possible moment.

Reporters brought aboard the plane were not told where they were going until it had taken off and had their cell phones confiscated. Before taking off, Air Force One was boarded inside a closed hangar to prevent unauthorized US military personnel from learning of the President's departure.

Once in Afghanistan, Obama's six-hour visit—less than half the time it took him to fly there—was restricted to the heavily fortified US Bagram Air Base and the Afghan presidential palace in Kabul, where he was flown by helicopter.

Underlying these precautions is the reality that after eight and a half years of war, neither the Karzai regime nor the 120,000 US-led occupation troops can guarantee security anywhere in the country, including its capital.

The US media largely treated the Afghanistan trip as a matter of Obama boosting the morale of US troops—with a selected audience of soldiers and Marines assembled to greet him—and laying down the law to Karzai on issues of official corruption and methods of governance.

The *New York Times* stated that the visit "capped a high-profile week for Mr. Obama in which he achieved a singular victory domestically—signing health care legislation…" It suggested that with this domestic legislation under his belt, the US President was now in a position to turn his attention to his principal foreign policy initiative: a military "surge" that is deploying an additional 30,000 US troops in Afghanistan.

The reality is that Obama's rhetoric about the US intervention in Afghanistan is just as false as his claims about health care "reform." Underlying both is the deepening crisis of US capitalism and the attempt to resolve it on the basis of aggressive war abroad and a wholesale assault on the working class at home.

In addressing the troops, Obama barked out a potted description of US aims in Afghanistan in a bizarrely incongruous "yes we can" cadence. "We are going to disrupt and dismantle, defeat and destroy al Qaeda and its extremist allies," he said. Obama continued: "That is our mission. And to accomplish that goal, our objectives here in Afghanistan are also clear: We're going to deny al Qaeda safe haven. We're going to reverse the Taliban's momentum. We're going to strengthen the capacity of Afghan security forces and the Afghan government so that they can begin taking responsibility and gain confidence of the Afghan people."

He repeated virtually word-for-word the lying justifications given by his predecessor for the US war, claiming that 100,000 troops are being deployed in Afghanistan to fight Al Qaeda, whose strength in the country has been estimated by US military commanders at barely 100.

The war, he claimed, is "absolutely necessary, absolutely essential to America's safety and security," adding that "Those folks back home are relying on you."

Unlike his earlier speeches, including the one given at West Point last December in which he announced the Afghanistan "surge," Obama made no mention of plans to begin withdrawing troops in July 2011. On the contrary, he stressed that the US occupation in Afghanistan will continue indefinitely.

"The United States of America does not quit once it starts on something," he told the troops. "You don't quit, the American armed services does not quit, we keep at it, we persevere and together with our partners we will prevail."

In his speech nearly four months ago, Obama insisted that the time frame for beginning a US withdrawal was essential in that it demonstrated that "America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan." His failure to mention it to the troops on the ground there strongly suggests that the American ruling elite has no intention of leaving the country.

The US President's visit came as the American military is preparing another bloody offensive in Afghanistan's southern Kandahar Province, one that will bring US troops into urban combat in the crowded city of Kandahar, with its population of 900,000.

Quoting a "senior military official," the Associated Press reported Monday that US-led forces will launch the offensive in June, with the aim of driving the Taliban out of Kandahar City, the former capital of the Taliban, before the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in August.

Even before this offensive, the casualty rate among occupation troops has risen sharply. The number of US troops killed in Afghanistan during the first two months of this year rose to 57,

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double the number killed in January and February of 2009, when 28 died.

The number of wounded has soared, reaching 381 in the first two months of 2010, compared to 85 during the same period last year, an increase of nearly 350 percent. Just in the first six days of this month, 44 US troops were wounded, an average of over seven a day. This compares to 50 US soldiers and Marines wounded in the entire month of March last year.

With both the coming Kandahar offensive and the traditional spike in fighting that takes place in the summer, these escalating casualty rates are expected to rise even more steeply.

While the US media, citing administration officials, has largely portrayed Obama's meeting with Karzai as a sharp exchange based upon US impatience with long-standing corruption in the Kabul puppet regime, there are strong indications that there were more pressing and immediate concerns.

In particular, there is anger within Washington over Karzai's recent trips to Iran and China, which are seen as a challenge to US dominance in Afghanistan.

"He's slipping away from the West," the *New York Times* quoted a senior European diplomat as saying.

The weekend before Obama landed in Afghanistan, Karzai was in Tehran celebrating the Persian New Year with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While there he also met with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This follows Karzai's welcoming Ahmadinejad on an official visit by the Iranian leader to Kabul early this month.

Under conditions in which Washington is pursuing an increasingly bellicose policy towards Iran, demanding increased sanctions and increasingly floating threats of military aggression, this rapprochement between its Afghan client regime and Tehran represents a slap in the face to the Obama administration.

During his own trip to Afghanistan earlier this month, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates made the unsubstantiated allegation that Iran is providing unspecified aid to Afghan forces resisting the US-led occupation and threatened US retaliation.

Of similar concern is a three-day trip that Karzai made to China last week. Washington has indicated resentment over Chinese investments in the exploitation of Afghan natural resources and other areas of the country's economy, initiatives that it sees as somehow illegitimate because of Beijing's refusal to support US military operations in the country.

In an editorial entitled "China's role in Afghan dilemma," published on March 25, on the eve of Karzai's visit to Beijing, the official *China Daily* bitterly expressed a diametrically opposed position, accusing Washington of exploiting its military presence, and the pretense of fighting terrorism, to dominate the country and its economy and threaten Chinese interests.

"The US has a huge number of troops in Afghanistan that provide security for its assistance projects," the paper stated. "America gets priority in project selection because it offers 'protection' to the Hamid Karzai government. Its economic input is aimed at paying for its military operations. In contrast, Chinese enterprises face great risk while working for Afghanistan's reconstruction and encounter fierce international competition in getting a contract. Unlike the US, Chinese investments are mainly in roads, hospitals and schools, and come without any riders."

The editorial continued: "The US has an offensive counterterrorism strategy, in which Afghanistan is being used as a pawn to help it maintain its global dominance and contain its competitors. China, on the other hand, pursues a defensive national defense policy and wants to have good relations as a neighbor of Afghanistan."

In an unmistakable warning, the editorial stated: "China cannot stay oblivious to the Afghan issue. The chaos caused by the war in Afghanistan is threatening the security of China's northwestern region."

USA Today published a series of revealing interviews with Afghans on their response to Obama's visit, indicating that they saw it within the prism of US geopolitical interests and conflicts with rival regional powers.

The paper quoted Majib Rahman, a civil engineer, who said that Obama "wanted to show that troops will be here for a longer time. He wanted to show their presence to Iran, to China, to Russia—to show them their dominance in the region."

Similarly, Mohammad Khan, a member of the Afghan parliament, told *USA Today* that Obama had come "to scold Karzai for recent visits to Iran, Pakistan and China."

"In the private talks, (Obama) must have pressed on these issues," he said. "It's not possible to maintain two strategies: to have friendship (with the Americans) and to make plots with America's enemies."

And Shamsuddin Fazeli, 50, who has sold fuel to US forces during the occupation, said that the US military was in Afghanistan not to fight terrorism but to assert US interests in the region.

"The Taliban are a small group. If Obama and the international community really wanted peace, they would have it in two months," said Fazeli. "They found (former Iraqi president) Saddam Hussein in a basement in the desert, but why haven't they found Osama bin Laden, (Taliban leader) Mullah Omar? That means they're not serious about peace. They want to change Afghanistan into a battlefield to conduct attacks on other countries."

Clearly the US war in Afghanistan, now in its ninth year, is stoking far wider geopolitical tensions and sowing the seeds for what could prove a far bloodier and wider conflict. Obama's sudden visit to Kabul was driven in no small part by concern that despite his military "surge" and the continuing sacrifice of US troops, US imperialism could still face a steadily deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and, ultimately, loss of control to its rivals.

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