

NATO casualties rise in Afghanistan before Kandahar offensive

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Ten NATO soldiers were killed in Afghanistan Monday, in the deadliest day for NATO occupation forces since the killing of 11 US troops in a helicopter crash last October. The attacks came shortly after the end of a “peace jirga,” an attempt to negotiate peace between Afghanistan’s major warlords and tribal leaders, and as NATO forces in the south prepare to mount a military assault on Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second-largest city.

The soldiers killed Monday included five US soldiers killed by a homemade bomb in eastern Afghanistan and two US soldiers killed by a bomb in southern Afghanistan. Two Australian troops and one French legionnaire were killed in three separate attacks. The soldiers’ identities were not disclosed, pending notification of their families. Two civilian contractors training Afghan police died during a suicide attack on a police center in Kandahar Monday.

Through these June 6 attacks, a total of 1,812 NATO soldiers had been killed since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, including 1,020 US troops.

Yesterday, two US soldiers died in a roadside bombing and one British soldier was shot dead on patrol. NATO spokesmen warned that occupying troops would continue to suffer higher casualties prior to and during the assault on Kandahar.

The NATO assault on Kandahar is scheduled to begin this month. A city of 450,000 inhabitants in the ethnic-Pashtun south, it was the birthplace of the Taliban militia movement when it enjoyed US support in the mid-1990s and has emerged as a center of resistance to the US-led occupation.

Notwithstanding US claims that the Kandahar offensive will be completely different from the US destruction of the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, the planned offensive involves besieging the city and going

house-to-house to kill or capture Afghans resisting the US occupation. The US hopes the bulk of hand-to-hand fighting will be carried out by Afghan troops. This strategy, if applied, would produce an immense bloodbath.

US military officials have produced reports warning of the likelihood of mass popular resistance to a NATO offensive. In a March 2010 Kandahar Province Survey Report, US Army researchers concluded that popular anger risked sparking mass armed opposition to NATO forces if they invaded the city. They wrote that the unpopularity of the regional government “sets conditions for a disenfranchised population to respond either by not supporting the government due to its inability to deliver improvements in the quality of life or, worse yet, by supporting the Taliban.”

NATO attempts to use Kandahar’s unpopular, corrupt and fractious warlord elite to suppress popular resistance to the occupation have so far met with failure. Moreover, they have exacerbated rivalries between Afghan political factions: Kandahar is a power base for the clan of Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president installed by US-led forces after the 2001 invasion.

Commenting on NATO operations in Kandahar, the Christian Science Monitor wrote, “The largest impediment remains President Hamid Karzai’s half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai. A controversial kingpin and reputed drug smuggler who reportedly has been paid by the CIA, he wields virtually unchecked power over the region as the chairman of the provincial council.” The Monitor added that he draws power from links to “local militias, security firms awarded lucrative contracts by the US-led international force, and an alliance with a small band of powerful tribal leaders.”

Speaking at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) last month, Washington Post columnist

David Ignatius explained, “I was in Kandahar at the end of March, I sat in a Shura in which all the local big-shots—who are resented by a lot of the ordinary folks in Kandahar—sat around and basically said, over our dead bodies will you change things. And these aren’t Taliban, these are our friends. They’re basically saying, the way in which we divide up the spoils, where our tribe and our friends get all the goodies, that’s the way we’re going to do it.”

While frustrated with Karzai and Kandahar’s warlords, Ignatius’s greater fear was that NATO could not control the population without the warlords’ help: “If you knock that whole power structure over, as much as it’s resented by people in Kandahar city and Kandahar district, you’re going to create a vacuum into which will flow...you don’t know.”

NATO pressure on Karzai is intensifying political tensions, particularly between the US and Karzai, as Karzai tries to balance Afghanistan’s complex ethnic divisions, whose strategic ramifications extend throughout Asia and the Middle East.

These problems were highlighted at President Karzai’s June 2-4 “peace jirga,” which attempted to negotiate a settlement between Afghanistan’s main warlord factions. In particular, Karzai appealed to the Taliban to lay down their weapons and accept positions in government. However, his speech was interrupted by Taliban rocket attacks on the peace jirga site.

Significantly, neither leading ethnic-Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum nor ethnic-Hazara leader Hajji Muhammad Moheqiq attended the peace jirga.

The peace jirga could not come to an agreement on policy toward the Taliban. The only proposal that emerged from the jirga was a resolution to investigate Afghan jails and release prisoners who are being held without evidence, though the central government in Kabul has little power to enforce such a decision on regional warlords.

One delegate, Muhtara Maha Bibi from Badghis province in northeastern Afghanistan, told UPI, “I was not satisfied. Everything we concluded was already planned.”

Karzai sacked two leading security officials, Interior Minister Hanif Atmar and intelligence director Amrullah Saleh for failing to prevent the Taliban attacks on the peace jirga.

Saleh previously worked as a top intelligence official

for Ahmad Shah Massoud, the anti-Soviet mujahedin warlord who was a leading figure in the Tajik-dominated, anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in the late 1990s.

After Massoud’s death in 2001 and the US invasion, the Northern Alliance provided the bulk of the ground troops for the US-led defeat of the Taliban. The Northern Alliance, including largely Tajik and Uzbek forces, received support from Russia, India and Iran against the ethnic-Pashtun Taliban forces backed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Northern Alliance officials have played leading roles in the Karzai government, though Karzai was selected as president to represent Afghanistan’s Pashtun majority.

Atmar, a member of the Afghan Stalinist KHAD secret police during the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war, fled to Britain after the mujahedin captured Kabul in 1992. He returned to Afghanistan in 2002 to accept positions under Karzai.

Numerous Western press outlets reacted to Karzai’s dismissal of Saleh and Atmar with alarm. They denounced the dismissals—like Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s visit to Kabul this march—as a signal that Karzai was not responsive to the demands of his Western backers.

The New York Times commented that Saleh’s and Atmar’s “ready dismissals have left the sense that, in trying to ensure his own survival, Mr. Karzai will not hesitate to make decisions counter to the interest of his staunchest Western allies.”

The Times added that Karzai’s “insecurity has left Mr. Karzai alternately lashing out in anger and searching for new allies, turning to Iran and elements within the Taliban. Both are antagonistic to American interests.”



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