

Petraeus signals escalation of US military violence in Afghanistan

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In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday, General David Petraeus, Obama's new commander in Afghanistan, said he would reconsider the rules of engagement as part of an intensification of the US assault on the Afghan people. He also made clear that American troops would remain in the country well beyond the July 2011 date set by the administration to begin a withdrawal.

Petraeus received fawning praise from Democratic and Republican senators alike. He was rapidly confirmed by the Armed Services Committee Tuesday afternoon and is expected to be confirmed by the full Senate on Wednesday.

In the week since the firing of Gen. Stanley McChrystal and his replacement by Petraeus, it has become clear that the shift in command is bound up with a decision to significantly step up the killing and wounding of Afghan civilians in an effort to crush the massive popular support for anti-US insurgents. A series of articles—including the original *Rolling Stone* article that led to McChrystal's firing—have pointed to restrictions in McChrystal's rules of engagement that somewhat limited US firepower in the name of reducing civilian casualties.

A *New York Times* article that appeared on the day of McChrystal's firing quoted unnamed soldiers complaining of "being handcuffed" by limits on the use of lethal force.

Responding to written questions prior to his testimony, Petraeus wrote, "One of my highest priorities...will be to assess the effect of our ROE [rules of engagement] on the safety of our forces and the successful conduct of our mission."

Petraeus emphasized in his opening remarks, "Those on the ground must have all the support they need when they are in a tough situation... I am keenly aware of

concerns by some of our troopers on the ground about the application of our rules of engagement and the tactical directive. They should know that I will look very hard at this issue."

The driving force behind concerns over the rules of engagement is not the sentiment of soldiers, but the failure of the US military to suppress the anti-occupation insurgency. US policy makers have concluded that the Taliban and other insurgent groups have widespread and growing popular support, which must be answered by more killing and terrorizing of the Afghan people.

One focus of questioning on Tuesday was the use of air strikes. Many of the most brutal atrocities against civilian populations have occurred when the US called in air power to respond to military engagements, annihilating whatever buildings might be in the area. Petraeus made clear that he would give greater latitude in the use of air power in Afghanistan.

"My sense is that the tough fighting will continue; indeed, it may get more intense in the next few months," Petraeus added.

Several senators questioned Petraeus on the July 2011 date given by Obama last year for the beginning of a drawdown of US forces. The date, announced at the same time the president announced he would increase the US troop level by 30,000, was conceived as a cynical means to deceive US public opinion, largely against the war, by packaging the escalation as a step toward ending the conflict.

At the same time, Obama made clear that any, even minimal, drawdown of troops would be determined by "conditions on the ground."

As the crisis of the US occupation has deepened, the administration has come under pressure to make its long-term commitment to the war more explicit.

“As the President has stated, July 2011 is the point at which we will begin a transition phase in which the Afghan government will take more and more responsibility for its own security,” Petraeus wrote in response to questions submitted by the senators, echoing remarks of Obama from last week. “As the President has also indicated, July 2011 is not a date when we will be rapidly withdrawing our forces and switching off the lights and closing the door behind us.”

“It is going to be a number of years before Afghan forces can truly handle the security tasks in Afghanistan on their own,” Petraeus added. “The commitment to Afghanistan is necessarily, therefore, an enduring one.”

Obama himself has made statements in recent days responding to criticisms of comments attributed to Vice President Joe Biden that a large number of troops would leave in July 2011. On Sunday, Obama said at a press conference following the G20 summit in Toronto: “Now, there has been a lot of obsession around this whole issue of when do we leave. My focus right now is how do we make sure that what we’re doing there is successful, given the incredible sacrifices that our young men and women are putting in.”

By “success,” Obama means drowning in blood the entirely legitimate national resistance in Afghanistan to the US occupation.



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