

Escalating violence in Afghanistan as Kandahar offensive nears

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The US-led occupying forces in Afghanistan are stepping up their operations in Kandahar Province ahead of an offensive in the provincial capital, Kandahar city, anticipated to be the largest of the nine-year war. Within US and European ruling circles, however, there are now clear signs of concern for the viability of the Kandahar offensive and the far-reaching implications of failure.

An article in the *Financial Times* last Friday, “Confidence in Kandahar campaign wanes,” explained: “Stanley McChrystal, the top NATO commander in Afghanistan, considers success here, in the Taliban’s cradle, as a critical step towards a point where the population starts to rally behind the Afghan state. Yet, a campaign of insurgent violence, coupled with alienation from the government and the corrosive influence of Kandahar’s criminal cartels, suggests that goal is slipping away ... Although the city is nominally under government control, insurgents have infiltrated. Some neighbourhoods are almost no-go areas for security forces; motorbike-riding assassins have stepped up killings of government officials; suicide bombers strike at will.”

US and NATO officials have in recent weeks attempted to downplay the military component of their strategy to regain control of Afghanistan’s second largest city, countering previous suggestions that there would be a highly visible en masse deployment of troops. The operation has been named “Hamkari Baraye Kandahar”—“Cooperation for Kandahar”. McChrystal has insisted that the goal is to increase the authority of the central government headed by President Hamid Karzai.

The US military appears to be downplaying expectations for Kandahar in light of its failure to secure the rural Marjah district in Helmand Province after waging a high-profile offensive there in February. McChrystal last week described Marjah as a “bleeding ulcer” and urged local commanders to speed up efforts at developing local government structures and suppressing resistance among the local population, which continues to shelter the Taliban fighters who have long lived and worked among them.

The US and its allies are locked in a classic colonial conflict, confronting a suspicious and hostile populace within which there is no clear-cut division between civilians and guerrilla fighters. The essential purpose of the war is to secure Washington’s control over the strategically crucial oil and gas reserves and pipeline routes of Central Asia. For the troops involved, the official pretext of preventing further terrorist attacks internationally is wearing thin and there are mounting indications of frustration and demoralisation. The inevitable outcome will be further war crimes inflicted on the Afghan people.

For all the public emphasis on the Kandahar operation as a “process” aimed at winning the population’s confidence, behind the scenes preparations are being finalised for an enormous upsurge in violence, involving urban combat and house-to-house searches and mass arrests. According to the *Financial Times*, “Hamkari Baraye Kandahar” will involve 11,500 US and Canadian troops and about 12,000 of their proxy Afghan soldiers and police.

Associated Press noted on Sunday: “The Taliban are deeply embedded in the local population, raising the

risk of civilian casualties in major clashes. Neither is the Taliban regarded as an alien force. For many in Kandahar, they are neighbours, friends and relatives.” Haji Raaz Mohammad, a 48-year-old farmer, told the news agency that he has never understood why the US is trying to drive out the militants. “I don’t know why they are doing it,” he said. “The Taliban are not outsiders. They are our own people.”

“I am living here since birth and I think the Taliban time was much better than this,” Neda Mohammad, a Kandahar businessman, added. “The only thing that we were missing at that time was a hospital. Otherwise, we were much better [off] then than now. Why do the Americans think they can win? They can’t win and they know that.”

Coalition operations are already underway on Kandahar’s outskirts and surrounding rural areas. On Sunday, NATO helicopters launched an air strike on an alleged militant hideout in the province’s Panjwayi district. Kandahar’s police chief claimed eight insurgents were killed, while a local farmer named Hazarat told the AFP news agency at Kandahar city hospital that four civilians, including his father, were wounded in the attack.

Another NATO helicopter strike the same day reportedly destroyed several homes and inflicted serious casualties in another part of Kandahar. “We were at home,” an elderly man, giving his name as only Karim, told AFP at the city’s Mirwais hospital. “There were no Taliban in the village. The helicopters just came and bombed our homes and left. Four people including my son were injured. One person was killed.”

Coalition authorities maintain no toll of the number of the Afghan civilians they kill. Most cases are never investigated, while in a few high-profile incidents, nothing happens beyond token penalties against low-ranking troops. On Saturday, the US military admitted to killing 23 civilians and wounding 12 others on February 21 after supposedly mistaking them for a Taliban convoy. The official report stated that the crew of a remote-controlled drone aircraft had “provided inaccurate reporting” before the air strike, and “information that the convoy was anything other than

an attacking force was ignored or downplayed by UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle] personnel”. According to Reuters: “Four officers, including senior leaders at battalion and brigade level, had been officially reprimanded, while two junior officers were formally admonished.”

While the US-led forces are now concentrating in Kandahar, fighting is continuing throughout Afghanistan. In the north-east Nuristan Province, the Taliban claimed to have captured Barg-e-Matal district after several days of fighting against Afghan government forces. A local police commander told NBC News: “We lost.” The *New York Times* reported that Pakistani Taliban fighters were also involved, seeking refuge from US-backed Pakistani military attacks.

The Barg-e-Matal battle was one of several violent incidents last weekend. In the eastern province of Paktia, guerrillas ambushed an Afghan police convoy with a roadside bomb and gunfire. Different reports stated that five or seven officers were killed. Also in Paktia Province, NATO planes dropped bombs on militants who had fired mortars at coalition forces in Zormat district. In Kunduz Province, Taliban fighters attacked a police checkpoint, producing a gun battle that lasted several hours. In Khost City, southeast of Kabul, eight police were wounded by a suicide bomb attack.

President Barack Obama’s escalation of the conflict is producing more casualties among both Afghan civilians and foreign troops. According to the *icasualties.org* web site, last month saw 49 coalition soldiers lose their lives, compared to 27 in May last year. So far this year, 222 troops have been killed, compared to 119 after the first five months of 2009. Those figures will rise again as the offensive in Kandahar begins in earnest.



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