Afghan attacks kill 12 US, British troops in 48 hours

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A series of attacks claimed the lives of 12 US and British occupation troops over the course of 48 hours as the crisis besetting Washington's occupation of Afghanistan continues to deepen.

Eight US soldiers were killed within a 24-hour period in southern Afghanistan, Pentagon officials revealed Wednesday. In the boldest of these attacks, Afghan insurgents laid siege to the headquarters of the elite Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) in Kandahar Tuesday, killing three US troops, an Afghan policeman and five Afghan civilian employees, three of them translators and two of them security guards.

The attack began with a suicide attacker driving a car bomb into the gate of the facility. Other insurgents continued the assault, firing rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons at US and Afghan puppet forces.

On Wednesday, a roadside bomb killed four more US troops, while another American soldier died in a gun battle, also in the south.

British forces also suffered serious losses in Helmand Province. While one British Marine was shot to death while on foot patrol, three soldiers died in an incident with far more ominous significance for the occupation forces.

An Afghan soldier carried out what the British Ministry of Defense described as a "suspected premeditated attack" on British forces assigned to train him and other members of the Afghan national army at a base in the Nahr-i-Saraj district in Helmand Province.

The Afghan soldier reportedly killed one British soldier as he slept and then fired a rocket-propelled grenade into the base's command center, killing a company commander in charge of the facility as well as another British officer.

The soldier fled the scene, evading a manhunt mounted by British and Afghan forces. A spokesman for the Taliban reported that he had found safe haven with its fighters.

The attack follows a similar incident, also in Helmand, last November in which an Afghan policeman shot and killed five British soldiers. The soldiers had been "mentoring" the police officer, who was never apprehended.

The series of attacks underscored the crisis of the US-led occupation and, in particular, of the key component of the so-called "exit strategy" devised by Washington and London; i.e., the training of Afghan puppet security forces. The aim is to have these units, backed by US and British special operations forces, take over the repressive tasks now carried out by 100,000 US and 40,000 other NATO troops.

The attack in Helmand has further fueled distrust of British trainers toward the Afghan trainees. There are growing recriminations over the methods used to bring in these recruits, with charges that there is no serious attempt to vet them for insurgents as the US-led occupation desperately tries to cobble together local forces that can engage in combat.

In a report issued last month, the US Special Inspector-General for Afghan Reconstruction spelled out in detail the disastrous state of this effort. The report found that only 23 percent of Afghan soldiers and 12 percent of police were capable of working independently of the occupation forces. It further found that the Pentagon had "overstated operational capabilities" of the Afghan units.

Units that are deemed by the US military as capable in many cases wither away after training. The report found that in March more than a quarter of the Afghan army was either Absent without Leave (AWOL) or off duty on approved absences, and that fully one third of its ranks disappear each year due to troops deserting, deaths and injuries. In some cases, the report found, absenteeism reduced Afghan battalions to company strength.

Gen. David Petraeus, who earlier this month replaced the sacked Afghanistan senior commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, issued a statement that baldly urged the US-occupation troops to ignore the Helmand incident's significance and "ensure that the trust between our forces remains solid in order to defeat our common enemies." The heart of the problem, however, is that increasing numbers of Afghans are seeing their "common enemies" as the foreign occupation forces, and some of them are joining the Afghan army and being armed and trained by the US and British military.

The British government also sought to downplay the incident. Prime Minister David Cameron insisted that his government would not be deterred from the "absolutely essential" task of training Afghan forces. "We must not let this change our strategy of building up the army, building up the government of Afghanistan," he said.

With some 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, the bulk of them deployed in Helmand, Britain has the second largest force in Afghanistan after the US.

Speaking at the Chatham House security think tank in London, Liam Fox, Britain's defense secretary, similarly insisted the

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incident would not affect the government's "resolve to see our mission through and train Afghan security forces so they can look after their own security and our forces one day can come home."

Fox went on to state, "We all know there is no such thing as a risk-free war, a casualty-free war or a fatality-free war."

While Fox and his audience of government officials, military analysts and others around the military-industrial complex may find this observation comforting, the rising death toll and the patent failure of the occupation to achieve anything but increasing violence and popular hostility in Afghanistan has fueled opposition to the war on both sides of the Atlantic.

With the surge in casualties on Tuesday and Wednesday, July is on track to once again set a record for the number of occupation troops killed in the nearly nine-year-old war. June registered the highest death toll yet, with 103 fatalities.

A poll released by CBS News this week found that 62 percent of Americans believe the war is going badly, with 54 percent calling for the government to set a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops.

President Barack Obama recently dismissed such calls for a timetable as an "obsession." As the poll indicates, he is dependent largely on Republican support for this position. The survey found that while just 32 percent of Republicans favor a withdrawal timetable, 73 percent of Democrats and 54 percent of independents support one.

In response to the deepening debacle in Afghanistan, Obama's new commander General Petraeus—previously handpicked by George W. Bush as senior US commander in Iraq—has embarked on a series of controversial policy shifts that seem certain to escalate the bloodshed.

First is his stated intention to review rules of engagement introduced by his predecessor, General McChrystal, with the aim of reducing popular support for the insurgency by limiting the civilian death toll from US aerial and artillery bombardments.

"Petraeus and other commanders have drawn a distinction between the rules, which are aimed at protecting civilians, and how they are implemented, suggesting that the review will focus on whether some commanders have placed too many restrictions on firepower," *USA Today* reported Wednesday.

"The rules are being reviewed to ensure troops don't misinterpret them and are able to use firepower when needed," the newspaper added.

Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, second-in-command in Afghanistan, told *USA Today* that Petraeus "wants to make sure that as we move forward with any adjustments, if there are any, that we continue to protect the Afghan civilians as much ... as we possibly can."

Meanwhile, according to the *New York Times*, Petraeus is holding "frenetic daily meetings" with Afghan President Hamid Karzai over the US general's proposal to develop local armed militias to combat the Afghan insurgency.

The proposal, appears to echo Petraeus's policy in Iraq, where the US occupation paid off insurgents to switch sides and form the Sunni Awakening or Sons of Iraq militias to maintain local security.

In Afghanistan, with its long and bloody history of warlordism and rival militias engaging in full scale civil war, the proposal is widely seen as a prescription for endless armed conflict. Karzai and his aides reportedly oppose the initiative out of fear that it will only further destabilize their fragile puppet regime and divert a portion of US funding from the government to potential rivals.

Finally, in what appears to be an effort aimed at thwarting an attempt by Karzai, with backing from the government of Pakistan, to open negotiations with the Taliban, Petraeus has called for leaders of one of the main Afghan insurgent groups to be placed on the US blacklist of foreign terrorist organizations. While Karzai has recently insisted that only a power-sharing settlement with the Taliban can end the bloodshed in Afghanistan and allow US-led forces to withdraw, Washington and its new commander, Petraeus, appear determined to militarily crush the insurgency.

Petraeus's attempt to have leaders of the so-called Haqqani network put on the US terrorist list came in the wake of Karzai's own call for 50 Taliban leaders to be removed from a 137-name blacklist maintained by the United Nations Security Council.

Karzai's intermediary in his negotiating bid is the Pakistani army's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), which has strong ties to the Haqqani network. Islamabad sees the group as an asset in maintaining its influence over Afghanistan and countering Indian and other foreign influence in the region.

Backing Petraeus's move to have the Taliban group placed on the State Department's foreign terrorist organization list is Senator Carl Levin, the Michigan Democrat who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Having returned recently from a trip to Afghanistan, Levin told reporters Tuesday that its designation as a terrorist group was "long overdue" and that he was "surprised to find out" it was not on a list.

Levin also clarified the significance of the so-called withdrawal deadline of July 2011 announced by Obama when he initiated his "surge" of 30,000 more US troops into Afghanistan.

"It's not an exit from Afghanistan," Levin said, adding that US troops would remain in the country for years to come.

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