

UK plans stepped-up offensive under new head of armed forces

Robert Stevens
20 July 2010

The appointment of General Sir David Richards as the new head of British armed forces is another signal of a major escalation of hostilities in Afghanistan alongside the United States. It brings to something of a conclusion years of seething political conflicts that were played out within the highest echelons of the ruling elite and the armed forces.

The UK has suffered a series of major setbacks in Afghanistan. The four British soldiers killed in 24 hours over the weekend takes the death toll since 2001 to 322. Last week, three British troops were slain at their base in the middle of the night by an Afghan soldier working alongside them, an ethnic Hazara and Shiite Muslim from the eastern province of Ghazni, who are considered hostile to the mostly ethnic Pashtun Sunni Muslims that make up the Taliban. He later reportedly telephoned the Associated Press to explain that he turned on coalition soldiers because they killed “innocent people” and used search dogs too close to Afghan women. This was the second time in eight months that a member of the Afghan security forces had attacked British troops and comes after an Afghan policeman killed five British soldiers in November.

The latest killings are a serious political blow, given the widespread public opposition to the war. A Taliban spokesman declared, “This is only the beginning and soon everyone in Afghanistan, every single member of the Afghan nation, will join us against NATO”.

Embarrassment was also created after a leaked memo yesterday stated that British combat troops are to leave Afghanistan by 2014. This was confirmed as the planned departure date by Defence Secretary Liam Fox. Prime Minister David Cameron had earlier spoken of wanting combat troops to be home by 2015 and Fox had initially stressed that British personnel could be the “last” to leave Afghanistan.

Despite this, the plan for a withdrawal timetable is in line with Britain’s stated backing for the US policy of stepping up hostilities against the insurgency under Gen. David Petraeus. Even if the withdrawal timetable is met it means at least another four years of fighting in Afghanistan, nor will this mean an end to the British presence. Fox repeated a warning that only frontline combat troops would be expected to be withdrawn at that time, and a continued British presence will be needed for “training” purposes.

Petraeus replaced Gen. Stanley McChrystal after he was sacked on June 23 in order to facilitate a stepping up of attacks on Afghan civilians in an effort to crush popular support for anti-US insurgents. Amongst other things, he has signalled moves to lift restrictions on air strikes that may cause civilian casualties. This shift found its echo in Britain, with Richards’ appointment as the chief of the Defence Staff (CDS).

Richards is the UK’s most senior military officer, and will take up the position in October when the current chief, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, steps down earlier than planned. He is currently the head of the British Army, and is a former commander of international forces in Afghanistan. He was appointed after being personally interviewed by Cameron and his deputy Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats. He is a vocal proponent of a “surge” of foreign forces into Afghanistan, and called in 2008 for an increase of 30,000, though not necessarily UK troops. Regarding UK forces, it is believed that Richards favoured the sending of 5,000 more British troops on top of the 8,000 then already deployed.

In his role as the head of the international coalition force in Afghanistan from May 2006-February 2007, Richards was the first British general since the Second World War to command US troops. He developed close

connections to the US military, including a long-standing relationship with Petraeus—making him particularly politically valuable to British imperialism.

In August last year Richards had been appointed the chief of the General Staff, the professional head of the Army, replacing Sir Richard Dannatt.

Dannatt had been a prominent critic of the then Labour government's war strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. He announced his support for the Conservative Party, even declaring that he might serve in a Tory administration, at the 2009 Conservative Party conference in the months prior to the general election. Gordon Brown's government was faced with constant demands from the Conservative opposition, Dannatt and top military figures to send an additional 2,000 soldiers to Afghanistan on top of the 9,000 already there.

Richards himself has close ties with the Tory Party. In 2009 his daughter Joanna was appointed as Cameron's diary secretary and was also an intern in William Hague's office.

Stirrup was viewed as a supporter of the Labour government. He was appointed in 2006 and was initially due to stand down in 2009, but his tenure was extended by Brown in order to prevent Dannatt from being in a position to succeed him as the chief of the Defence Staff. Stirrup will now step down in October, six months before he was due to leave.

Commenting on his impending removal last month, the *Daily Mail* said that new Defence Minister Liam Fox "regarded Sir Jock as too close to the previous Labour government and was concerned about his suitability in the role".

The newspaper cited the comments of Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Tootal, who had commanded the first 1,200 British troops into Helmand province in Afghanistan. Tootal had told BBC Radio 4 that Stirrup was in charge during a period of "chronic mismanagement" of the Armed Forces. "We have a tendency to blame ministers, but we can't ignore the role of the professional heads in the form of the CDS and permanent under-secretary, who advise our ministers", he said.

In November 2007, Tootal had quit the army, after penning a resignation letter to personnel chiefs denouncing Labour for failing to properly equip the armed forces in Afghanistan.

Richards is a forceful proponent of fighting wars that are based not on confronting a conventional army, but on suppressing a widespread insurgency movement.

In an interview with *Prospect* magazine, he said, "Conflict has moved on from the era of the tank and aircraft in the way that it moved on from the horse to the tank and the aircraft back in 1920s and 1930s. But we haven't really recognised how...one of the most dangerous things that might confront my soldiers today is a simple improvised explosive device. Can we deal with that? Are we ready—as retired general Rupert Smith has put it—for 'war amongst the people' rather than the old confrontation between national armies? I think we are still too much equipped for yesterday's war, not enough for tomorrow's war, and war prevention".

This escalation of the "war amongst the people" in Afghanistan was, said Richards, only now taking shape. "I've spent the last two days with General David Petraeus, the head of the US Central Command, and you've got to remember that the surge is, only now, coming on stream", he said.

To this end he said of the current troop levels of 10,000 British soldiers, "If the government said, right, you've got to quadruple it, then we'd do whatever we're ordered to do—but we could only do it for a limited period".

Richards stated his agreement with Cameron's announcement that UK combat troops should aim to be out of Afghanistan within five years, but he has previously spoken about some form of British presence for decades to come. Last year he stated that British forces could still be in Afghanistan in 40 years time. Emphasising the strategic importance of Afghanistan for Britain's long-term imperialist interests, he said, "Just as in Iraq, it is our route out militarily, but the Afghan people and our opponents need to know that this does not mean our abandoning the region".



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact