

Afghanistan casualty rate highest of war

James Cogan
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Eight months after the Obama administration announced a “surge” of 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan to crush the Taliban-led insurgency, the rate of US and allied casualties has soared to the highest level of the nearly nine-year war and is beginning to match the bloodiest stages of the occupation of Iraq.

Five more American soldiers were killed on Saturday, four in a single roadside bomb blast in an unspecified area of southern Afghanistan. The fatalities were announced amidst a desperate aerial and ground search by American forces to locate two missing Navy personnel.

The pair, whose identity and unit have not been made public, allegedly drove out of a base in the Afghan capital Kabul on Friday evening and, according to Afghan government sources, were stopped at a checkpoint on the edge of the Charkh district in the neighbouring province of Logar. Like numerous areas of southern Afghanistan, Charkh is largely under the control of the Taliban.

On Sunday, Taliban representatives claimed that the pair had been ambushed in Charkh and one captured and one killed. No explanation has been provided for the actions of the sailors apart from that given by a Logar provincial government representative, who told the *Washington Post* that a security guard at the checkpoint said they were “drunk” and “not normal.”

The body of the slain man has reportedly been recovered by US forces. The US military has not confirmed that the other sailor is being held by the Taliban. Private Bowe R. Bergdahl, an American soldier who allegedly walked out of his base in eastern Afghanistan in June 2009 and was captured, is still being held by the Taliban due to the US military’s refusal to agree to a prisoner exchange.

The six fatalities over the weekend have pushed the total July death toll to 77, of whom 56 have been US

personnel. The occupation forces suffered their largest monthly loss of the entire war last month with 102 killed, 60 of whom were American.

2010 will almost certainly be the most costly year of the entire war for the US-led occupation. The death toll has already reached 399, compared with the last year’s toll of 521.

The number of deaths, however, is only one aspect of the mounting crisis facing the 100,000 American and 30,000 NATO and other allied troops in Afghanistan. The number of soldiers being wounded has increased exponentially.

Figures released in early July showed that four times as many American troops were wounded in the first six months of 2010 as in the same time period last year. As of June 30, some 1,922 had been injured compared with 2,139 in all of 2009. In other words, for every soldier killed, close to 10 are being wounded, many of whom will be disabled for life due to the horrific injuries inflicted by bomb blasts.

The 10,000-strong British contingent, much of which is operating in the southern province of Helmand and has been used in the offensives intended to break the grip of the Taliban over the area, is taking even higher casualties. This year alone, 50 British troops have been killed and some 650 British troops have been admitted to hospital, over 300 for battlefield wounds and the others for “non-battle” injuries or disease. The British death rate has essentially doubled over recent weeks to 14 deaths per 1,000 troops deployed. The US rate is currently 6.8 deaths per 1,000 personnel.

The rise in dead and wounded is the direct outcome of Obama’s surge and escalation of the war. Thousands of American and British troops have been sent into operations in areas of southern provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar that have effectively been under Taliban control since the initial October 2001 invasion. They are coming up against well-organised

insurgents who clearly have the support of the civilian population in their struggle against a foreign military occupation and the corrupt puppet government it has installed in Kabul under President Hamid Karzai.

A July 21 Reuters profile on a 17-strong platoon of the 101st Airborne Division that was sent into the Arghandab district near the key southern city of Kandahar underscores the scope of resistance. Just three weeks after moving in the area, the unit had lost seven wounded. Three had lost one or both of their legs in bomb blasts. The platoon commander told Reuters: “As we’ve been taking casualties, we’ve not been able to push out, and they’ve been coming in closer. It’s been tough going for us.”

The US-led occupation faces the same strategic quagmire as that experienced by the Soviet military during its failed attempt to subjugate the Afghan people from 1979 to 1988. Even with 130,000 troops, tens of thousands of mercenary private contractors and sophisticated weaponry—more forces than the Soviets deployed—it cannot control vast swathes of the country and has been unable to cut off the movement of insurgents between Afghanistan and safe havens in the tribal regions of North West Pakistan.

Over the weekend, the Taliban allegedly recaptured the Barg-e Matal area in Nuristan province, which borders Pakistan and is an important supply route for their fighters. Occupation forces had been pulled out in order to bolster troop strength around the country’s major urban centres. The Afghan government forces left to hold the territory reportedly suffered large casualties before fleeing and abandoning it to the insurgency.

The attempt to construct a functioning Afghan puppet army and police to relieve the pressure on the US-led forces has effectively failed. Every level of the local security forces is riddled with corruption and demoralisation. Several recent incidents in which Afghan soldiers or police have killed their US or British trainers point to the resentment of the occupation and the likely infiltration of the Kabul government security forces by Taliban sympathisers.

Hamid Karzai claimed at last week’s international conference in Kabul that his government would be able to take over the conduct of the counterinsurgency by 2014. Even if one assumes that this optimistic and barely credible scenario is realised, it means that US

and allied forces face the prospect of between 2,000 to 4,000 more dead and as many as 40,000 wounded.

The Obama administration is nevertheless determined to realise the US imperialist objective of using Afghanistan as a base to exert dominance over the energy-rich Central Asian region. The removal of Gen. Stanley McChrystal as commander of the occupation forces has been followed by moves by the new commander, Gen. David Petraeus, to lift the few limitations McChrystal had imposed on the use of force against the Afghan civilian population.

At the same time, immense political pressure has been brought on the European and Australian governments taking part in the occupation to commit to keeping their troops in Afghanistan indefinitely, despite overwhelming domestic opposition to an ever more murderous neo-colonial war.

The chairman of the US Joints Chief of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, flew into Afghanistan on Sunday and bluntly told a press conference, “As we continue our force levels and our operations over the summer... we will likely see further tough casualties and levels of violence.”



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