

Afghanistan: Offensive in Kandahar underway

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The coalition's offensive in Kandahar, touted as the centrepiece of the "surge" in Afghanistan announced by US President Obama last December, is now well underway. With barely any coverage in the media internationally, as many 50,000 foreign and Afghan Army troops have deployed in and around the city.

Kandahar, which has a population of around 500,000, is under a state of military siege. The presence of the armed forces is felt everywhere, with constant patrols and expanding military bases. There are now 30,000 more US soldiers than a year ago and increased military police numbers.

Over the past four months, checkpoints have been established at all the main routes into the city, and thousands of tall concrete blast walls have been installed around police stations and government buildings. At the checkpoints, thousands of residents are daily subjected to population control measures by Afghan and foreign military police, including searches and biometric eye scans, which are checked against a list of around 25,000 suspected insurgents. Tens of thousands of residents have been issued with new identity cards.

Outside Kandahar city, in the western districts of Panjwai and Zhari and the northern district of Arghandab, occupation troops are conducting major "clearing" operations, using overwhelming and indiscriminate force against so-called Taliban "strongholds". Hundreds of alleged insurgents have been killed or arrested.

The Taliban fighters themselves are poorly armed and stand little chance in direct engagements with foreign troops. Canada's *National Post* described a recent attack in Panjwai in which "two Canadian Griffon helicopters flew overhead and fired a hailstorm of bullets at insurgents. A US aircraft then dropped a bomb. Canadian soldiers watching and listening from a nearby combat outpost cheered."

Such accounts are reminiscent of attacks in Iraq which resulted in substantial civilian deaths, including the infamous 2007 massacre of civilians from an Apache helicopter in Baghdad which was revealed by WikiLeaks in

April.

The increased killing in Kandahar and throughout Afghanistan is being overseen by General David Petraeus, the architect of the former Bush administration's "surge" in Iraq. Petraeus was appointed by Obama to replace General Stanley McChrystal in June. McChrystal, while ostensibly fired for comments to *Rolling Stone* criticising the administration, was removed after he delayed the assault on Kandahar due to the failure of thousands of troops to secure the Marjah area in Helmand province.

Since taking command, Petraeus has ordered the start of the offensive despite the significant fighting still taking place against the occupation forces in Helmand and other areas. The same strategies used by Petraeus to crush the Baghdad insurgency in 2007 are now being used in Kandahar. During the Baghdad offensive, entire areas of the city were turned into what the US military termed "gated communities", with blast walls, checkpoints and control measures used to imprison the population and facilitate the targeted killing of insurgents.

Reports from Kandahar indicate widespread hostility to the "surge". Thomas Johnson, an adviser to Canada's Task Force Kandahar, told reporters last week that he was amazed by the number of children throwing rocks and tomatoes and making obscene gestures at passing foreign troops. "I think that might be a leading indicator of other thoughts and conversations that are occurring in families . . . that we're being viewed as the occupier".

Tor Ghani, a taxi driver, told the *Canadian Press* that the new checkpoints reminded him of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s, adding that the corrupt Afghan National Police used them to collect bribes. A majority of respondents to a US Army survey earlier this year identified army and police checkpoints as the biggest threat to their security while travelling in Kandahar.

Foreign troops are widely seen as propping up the corrupt and illegitimate provincial government of Ahmad Wali Karzai, brother of Afghan puppet president Hamid Karzai, as well as the local government of Kandahar mayor Ghulam

Haider Hamidi. During a visit to the city last month, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, was bluntly told by three tribal elders that “the voice of ordinary people doesn’t reach this government”.

The elders also criticised the escalating military operations. One asked: “Are you bringing security here or are you bringing violence?” When Mullen responded that in the past month the Taliban had killed 45 civilians, while coalition forces had killed five, one of the men pointed out that none would have died “if you weren’t here”.

Many terrorised villagers in the Kandahar area have been forced to flee their homes. A taxi driver from a village in Panjwai told reporters last week that “security is getting worse day by day. ... We are not able to see our land because of IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and fighting. We are just alive. Our children cannot sleep due to the sounds of aircraft and fighting. It’s terrible being out there.” He added: “Every person is thirsty for peace and now everyone lost his hope, because we don’t believe the current administration will ever restore it.”

While US and Afghan military officials insist that the population is being terrorised by the Taliban, comments from residents demonstrate that their main fear is being killed by an occupation air strike or night-time raid. One Zhari farmer, Habibullah, told reporters: “If they carry out an air raid at our homes because the Taliban are there, or send soldiers at night, what will happen to us?” A villager from Malajat said he was “scared of an air strike, because we can have casualties there”. He added that he had seen many civilians killed this way.

The occupation forces have repeatedly sought to blame civilian casualties inflicted by foreign troops on the insurgents. Last month, the *Washington Post* reported that Lieutenant Campbell Spencer from the Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell had “said that the Taliban has taken to holding Afghan civilians as hostages to make it more difficult for the forces to attack without killing innocent people.”

Support for the insurgency is growing as more and more civilians are killed. Despite the troop buildup, Taliban fighters still move freely in villages surrounding Kandahar. In June, a survey by the International Council on Security and Development of 552 men in the Helmand and Kandahar provinces found that 70 percent opposed recent foreign military actions in their area, while only one percent believed that foreign troops were rebuilding the country. In Helmand, 83 percent of respondents said that the recent military surge there had been bad for the Afghan people.

A survey of 1,994 people in Kandahar in March, commissioned by the US Army, found that 94 percent of people supported a peace conference with the Taliban and 85 percent viewed the Islamist fighters as “our Afghan

brothers.”

Petraeus and other top US and NATO commanders insist that the nine-year Afghan war is entering its “final stages”, and that a victory in Kandahar will bring them closer to defeating the insurgency. Others in the US military establishment, however, have voiced concerns that the surge could be in vain, since the Taliban has now spread to virtually every province in the country.

Marc Sageman, an analyst from the Foreign Policy Research Institute and a former CIA agent, told the *Washington Post* last week: “You can pacify Kandahar and you’ll still lose the war because Afghanistan remains a highly decentralised society, and in the countryside, the Kabul government has little legitimacy”.

The February offensive in the largely rural area of Marjah in Helmand province ultimately failed to uproot the Taliban. Now, under Petraeus, the US-led forces are resorting to even more bloodshed and repression as they desperately attempt to crush the resistance to the neo-colonial occupation of the impoverished country.

In response, insurgent attacks on foreign troops have increased. On August 31, another six US soldiers died—four of them in a roadside bomb attack in eastern Afghanistan, and two in gunfights with insurgents in the south—bringing the total killed in the past four days to 23. The total number of foreign troops to die this year is 489, compared to 521 for all of 2009.

Coalition attacks throughout the country are also increasing, resulting in more civilian deaths. On August 22, NATO commandos massacred eight civilians, including two women and a child, and injured 12 more during a raid in the village of Naik in Baghlan Province. An air strike in Kunar Province last week killed six children between the ages of six and 12. Another was seriously injured.



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