

2010 already deadliest year for US troops in Afghanistan

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A series of attacks across Afghanistan have driven the death toll for American troops in the country to at least 326 this year, according to the icasualties.org website, making 2010—with four months still to go—already the deadliest year yet for US forces. In all of 2009, the US military suffered 317 fatalities.

At least 26 US soldiers and Marines have lost their lives since last Saturday as armed groups opposing the US-led occupation and the puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai have carried out deadly bombings and engaged US forces in firefights concentrated in the eastern and southern parts of the country.

With 56 fatalities, August trailed only July, with 65, and June, with 60, as the most costly month in nearly nine years of war.

Two more US soldiers were killed in fighting Thursday.

According to icasualties.org, 1,273 US troops, 332 from Britain, 152 from Canada and 304 from other countries have been killed since the war began.

There is no accurate count of Afghan civilians killed in the war, though conservative estimates place the death toll in the tens of thousands.

US and NATO officials have attributed the recent spike in casualties to the Obama administration's "surge," which has sent an additional 30,000 US troops into the country, bringing the total force to nearly 100,000 American soldiers and Marines, together with nearly another 50,000 NATO and other foreign forces.

Gen. David Petraeus, the senior US commander in Afghanistan, told reporters Tuesday that the US occupation force would reach full strength within days. "For the first time, we will then have the tools and what is required in place to carry out the kind of campaign that [is] necessary here with our Afghan partners," he said.

Petraeus repeated his formulation downplaying the significance of President Obama's July 2011 deadline when, as Obama put it last December, "our troops will

begin to come home."

"July 2011 is a time when a process begins, the pace of which is determined by conditions on the ground," said Petraeus. "There has been a misinterpretation that this is when we race for the exits and find a light switch to turn them out before we leave the room. And that is not the case."

Acknowledging growing opposition to the war in the US, with recent polls indicating at least 60 percent of the population opposed to it, the general demanded that the American people allow the war to continue.

"It is understandable that there is impatience and a desire to see progress right now," he said, "but the nature of these endeavors is such that progress is slow, it is hard-fought," he cautioned.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who arrived in Kabul Thursday after officiating at a ceremony in Baghdad marking the formal end to US "combat operations" in Iraq—while 50,000 American combat troops continue to occupy the country—was even more blunt.

In an interview with Fox news, Gates said, "My gut tells me that we will probably have a troop presence in Afghanistan for some period of time." The defense secretary continued, "I don't know what that period of time is. I would say certainly more than two years. But I don't know what that length of time would be. It will depend on the success of our operations; it will depend on the pressures the Taliban feel themselves under when they discover in August of 2011 we're not gone."

Gates and other US and NATO officials have warned that casualties will continue to rise as the American military presses ahead with its offensive against the southern city of Kandahar and as violence rises in the run-up to parliamentary elections scheduled for September 18. Various non-governmental entities have called for the elections to be called off, warning that security has deteriorated markedly since the debacle of the presidential

and provincial council elections held last year, and that the corrupt system that presided over a rigged vote then has remained unchanged. Washington is determined to go ahead with the exercise.

An indication of the growing pressure on the US military has come in the form of a series of press statements emphasizing body counts for alleged insurgents killed by US and other occupation forces.

“In August, the security force detained more than 500 insurgents and killed 160 more in security force operations,” read a press release issued by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the NATO umbrella group. “More importantly, the security force captured or killed 23 Haqqani Network and 53 Taliban leaders.”

While it is clear that US and other foreign occupation forces are unleashing greater firepower against the Afghan resistance, including stepped-up air strikes, a series of incidents have called into question the claims by NATO as to the “precision” character of these strikes and the identity of their victims.

In the latest incident, Afghan officials in the northern province of Takhar reported that 10 election workers were killed Thursday morning, when US warplanes and helicopter gunships attacked a convoy organized by a candidate as part of his election campaign.

ISAF had earlier claimed credit for the attack, claiming that it had been launched against a car carrying a leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. “After careful planning to ensure no civilians were present, coalition aircraft conducted a precision air strike on one sedan and later followed with direct fire from an aerial platform,” said the ISAF release, which claimed that “eight to 12 insurgents were killed or injured in the strike, including a Taliban commander.”

The governor of the northern province of Takhar, Abduljabar Taqwa, disputed the claim, telling BBC, “Without any co-ordination, without informing provisional authorities, they attacked, on their own, civilian people who were in a campaign convoy.”

“There aren’t even any Taliban in this area,” Taqwa said.

Among those wounded in the US attack was Abdulawahid Khorasani, a parliamentary candidate, who was on his way to campaign in the Rostaq district. Among the dead were members of his family and other supporters.

“I thought that the foreign troops came here to bring us

security and democracy,” he told the BBC. “I believed they were helping us so that we can campaign for the parliamentary election. Instead they attacked me.”

The office of Afghan President Hamid Karzai issued a statement condemning the air strike. “In the war on terror, pro-democracy people should be distinguished from those who fight against democracy,” Karzai said in the statement.

A similar claim issued by the US military earlier this month concealed another atrocity in Afghanistan’s eastern Wardak Province, as a report by McClatchy news agency correspondent Dion Nissenbaum revealed.

The news release issued by the occupation command claimed that “An Afghan and coalition security force killed several suspected insurgents and detained many more, including a Taliban commander,” in an August 12 operation.

While Nissenbaum acknowledged that many such releases are retailed by the media without examination, in this case the military action provoked an angry anti-occupation demonstration.

The information in the press release, Nissenbaum writes, “proved to be inaccurate and, in many ways, misleading.” The “Taliban commander” was no such thing, and the “insurgents” killed by US special forces turned out to be three young unarmed Afghan students who had just returned to their home to celebrate the holy month of Ramadan. “Blood stains in photos provided by the family suggest that the three were killed where they had been sleeping,” he reports.

The McClatchy reporter writes that the US military says that special forces teams like the one that carried out this massacre “are conducting more than 30 operations *each day*.”



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