

Debacle in Afghanistan: British troops withdraw from Sangin

Robert Stevens
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On September 20, the last 1,000 remaining UK troops withdrew from Sangin, southern Afghanistan. After more than four years, they handed over control of their bases to the United States.

The withdrawal is officially presented as merely redeployment, with the troops, part of an overall total British force of 9,500 in Afghanistan, being sent to the central Helmand province. But nothing can gloss over the fact that Britain has suffered a major defeat. This is not, as sections of the media claim, merely because Sangin has become a “training ground” for the Taliban. Britain’s armed forces were driven out as occupiers by a determined, popular insurgency.

That is why the *Daily Mail* acknowledged, “Senior military officials are desperate for it not to be seen as an admission of defeat or a retreat after the fiercest fighting for British soldiers since the Second World War.”

The withdrawal underscores the criminal destruction of life as a result of this dirty, imperialist war. Media reports paint a devastating picture of the situation that has faced the troops, year after year. By the time of their departure, 104 British soldiers, almost a third of the 337 British soldiers killed in Afghanistan, died in and around this small town.

Under the headline, “Sangin: at last we’re leaving hell”, the *Daily Express* noted in addition that in the first four-and-a-half years since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, five British soldiers were killed. The vast majority have died since early 2006 and the redeployment of British troops to Helmand. In April a report in the London *Times* stated that more than 10 percent of the daily casualties suffered by occupation forces were being taken by the UK 3 Rifles Battle Group in Sangin, even though the group represented only 0.8 percent of the total NATO force in

Afghanistan.

The British Army was under attack, even as the handover ceremony took place, with the *Daily Mail* reporting “fierce fire-fights...just 800 metres from the main base in the district centre”.

As could be expected, politicians and the media had nothing to say about the thousands of Afghans who have been killed or injured. Instead, Prime Minister David Cameron took pains to insist that, “The soldiers who lost their lives in Sangin did not die in vain”.

Such statements only demonstrate that, behind their rhetoric about supporting “our boys”, the ruling elite have nothing but contempt for those they have sent to die in Afghanistan. Cameron believes their deaths are a price worth paying, but he cannot tell the truth about why this is.

The Afghan invasion was sold to the British and American people on the basis of a pack of lies. Presented as part of the war “against terrorism” in the aftermath of 9/11, it was supposed to eliminate the regime harbouring Osama Bin Laden and providing the main base of operations for Al Qaeda. US military and intelligence officials have subsequently admitted that there were less than 100 Al Qaeda members in all of Afghanistan. The occupation was then supposed to bring about democracy by deposing the Taliban. Instead it resulted in the installation of the despised puppet regime of Hamid Karzai, which is defended by US military force and presides over unspeakable conditions for the masses of people.

In reality, the occupation of Afghanistan has been carried out on the basis of the predatory geo-strategic aims of Washington and London and was planned before the destruction of the Twin Towers provided the necessary pretext. For the US, the issue at stake, as with the later war against Iraq, was to establish its control of

the entire “Eurasian” region and above all else the majority of the world’s oil and gas reserves located in the Middle East and Central Asia. Britain both hoped to secure a share in the spoils, while trading on its political and military alliance to project its own interests on a global scale and offset the challenge of its European rivals Germany and France.

Twice now, the cost associated with this has forced a humiliating military retreat on Britain, first in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, and now in Sangin. The *Independent* acknowledged last week, “The British could, theoretically, have divested themselves of Sangin, and the losses which came with it, earlier. But here a sensitive chapter in Anglo-American relations came into play. There is little doubt that senior officers in the US military were critical of the way UK forces conducted themselves towards the end of their deployment in Iraq...and then withdrawing altogether when Washington was requesting that they stay on”.

The British withdrawal, despite official claims to the contrary, has occasioned bitterness and recriminations from the US Army. Ultimately, this only signifies that Britain’s travails are also a political setback for Washington. Britain was the only force maintaining the pretence of an independent military role in the occupation. The abandonment of this posture means that today, more than ever, this is America’s war.

In addition, claims that US control over Sangin will result in a strengthening of overall control of the region are without foundation. Describing the enormous popular opposition awaiting the US, the *Daily Telegraph* grimly predicted, “Sangin handover: only the nationalities on the tombstones will change”.

The US faces a deteriorating military and security situation throughout Afghanistan and rising opposition to the war at home. These were the conditions under which the Obama administration announced the 30,000-troop surge into the country last December, in an attempt to drown the resistance in blood. But despite this, the US has been unable to quell the massive resistance. With the September 21 deaths of nine US troops in a helicopter crash in Zabul province, southern Afghanistan, 2010 became the deadliest year for NATO forces since the 2001 invasion. At least 529 NATO troops have been killed so far this year.

Meanwhile, sections of the US military are becoming more vocal in their opposition to a “phased

withdrawal” of troops beginning in July 2011, which is President Barack Obama’s official aim.

According to a September 21 *Wall Street Journal* article, senior military heads are “seeking to lower expectations of rapid progress in Afghanistan” and forecast “few new significant gains in the war before the end of the year”. The *Journal* continued that rather than withdrawing “entire battalions or brigades”, the draw-down will focus on “thinning out” front-line troops and sending home small company-size units.

The Afghan occupation is a foul venture based on the brutal subjugation of an impoverished nation of fewer than 30 million people. Regardless of the conduct of this or that soldier, whether heroic or base, the military and political elites are guilty of an unspeakable crime. Working people internationally must demand an end to the war and the immediate withdrawal of all US, British and other foreign troops. Those who planned and executed this war of plunder should be brought before a war crimes tribunal and the court of world public opinion.

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