US commander in Afghanistan boasts of inflicting “enormous losses”

Peter Symonds
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The US commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, this week characterised the US surge as a success, but other military figures and officials were far more pessimistic about the military situation and the popular opposition generated by the carnage and destruction of the US-led war.

In a letter to his subordinates on Tuesday, Petraeus offered an upbeat assessment of the US-led occupation. Foreign troops and Afghan government forces, he wrote, had “inflicted enormous losses” on mid-level insurgents over the past year and had taken away “some of their most important safe havens”.

Petraeus claimed that the Taliban was on the defensive. “Now, in fact, the insurgents are increasingly responding to our operations rather than vice versa, and there are numerous reports of unprecedented discord among the member of the Quetta Shura, the Taliban senior leadership body,” he wrote.

The letter was pitched at justifying the Obama administration’s build-up of troops in Afghanistan last year, which has taken a terrible human toll—both of Afghans and foreign troops alike. Despite its claims to be winning “hearts and minds,” the American military’s murderous offensives—particularly in the southern province of Kandahar—have only intensified the intense public hostility to the neo-colonial occupation.

The pro-US governor of Baghlan province, Munshi Abdul Majid, told the *Washington Post*: “I can tell you this very clearly: 50 percent of the people who are working with the Afghan government, their hearts are with the Taliban. And this 50 percent feel the international community is not trustworthy and is trying to fool them.”

Since US President Barack Obama came to office in January 2009, the number of American troops has doubled to nearly 100,000, bringing the total foreign troop presence in Afghanistan to more than 150,000. Around 25,000 foreign troops, mainly American, poured into Kandahar last year, along with 10,000 government soldiers, in an attempt to control the city of 500,000 and surrounding areas.

Petraeus has sought to replicate the tactics he used in Iraq to crush armed insurgents and intimidate and terrorise the local population. Kandahar has been carved up by concrete barriers and a network of checkpoints has been established. In the surrounding areas, special forces have ramped up night-time raids to murder or capture alleged Taliban commanders. Petraeus has also eased restrictions on the use of American air strikes that have contributed to the toll of civilian deaths.

Earlier this month, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, was far more cautious than Petraeus. He described the military gains as “tenuous and fragile,” declaring: “As difficult as it may be to accept, we must prepare ourselves for more violence and more casualties in coming months. The violence will be worse in 2011 than it was in 2010 in many parts of Afghanistan.”

According to the UN, the number of civilian deaths for the first 10 months of last year was 2,412. In addition, according to the Afghan interior ministry, thousands of Afghan government soldiers and police died, along with an estimated 5,225 insurgents. In all, 711 foreign troops lost their lives—499 Americans, 103 British and 109 from other countries—up from 521 in 2009.

Recent US statistics have identified roadside bombs—improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—as being the single largest killer of US troops. The figure for last year put the death toll from IEDs at 268—a 60 percent rise compared to 2009—and the number of wounded at more than 3,360—an increase of 178 percent. Despite a $3.5 billion program to counter roadside bombings, US casualties have continued to rise as American troops have “surged” into the most volatile areas.

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The US military claims to be making progress in Kandahar. But a report produced for the Australian-based Lowy Institute last month, entitled "How Afghans view coalition military operations in Kandahar," concluded from interviewing locals that "the prospects for success do not appear high". The report, which is supportive of the occupation, noted that night raids in particular were alienating the population. "Indeed, for a Pashtun, it is almost better to be killed rather than to be dishonoured by having foreign soldiers in his house at night. These actions boil the blood of local communities and often result at a minimum in a loss of support for coalition forces and even lead to people joining the Taliban."

Assessing the outcome of US-led operations in the pro-government district of Alkozai, near Kandahar, the Lowy report wrote: "Even after several weeks of heavy fighting in the district, with local communities bearing the brunt of the casualties, coalition forces were still unable to claim victory. This had a huge negative impact on people's perceptions, with locals convinced that coalition forces would be unable to win the war, no matter what they did."

The Lowy report had little to say about the impact of US operations on civilians, which has been devastating. However, an Afghan presidential commission recently reported that military operations in Kandahar province had caused more than $100 million in damage to homes and farms over the past six months, with about 900 homes being deliberately destroyed. In addition, crops, fields and more than 100,000 orchard trees were destroyed. In line with its denials of civilian casualties, the American military has flatly denied the extent of the destruction, insisting that damage amounted to just $1.4 million.

An article in the London-based *Times* this week reported that the US military, with the authorisation of Petraeus, had adopted a policy of razing any houses suspected of being booby-trapped or being used by insurgents. The report estimated that hundreds of houses had been destroyed. "US Marines in Sangin destroyed a densely housed strip 100 metres wide on either side of the road into the Wishtan area of the town earlier this month to prevent insurgents using the buildings as cover," the newspaper stated.

In one notorious case, the US military razed the entire village of Tarok Kalache after designating it as "a Taliban tactical base". More than 20 tonnes of rockets were used to level the area. Some money was provided to rebuild the village at a different location. The tactic recalls the methods used during the Vietnam War to destroy villages and herd civilians into "strategic hamlets" under US control.

As for claims by Petraeus that the Taliban leadership is divided, American academic Matt Waldman noted last year that the US surge appeared to be consolidating the position of younger, more militant leaders. "I think it is increasingly difficult for so-called moderates to argue their case, in light of the scale and intensity of the coalition surge," he wrote. The Taliban had seen the heavy escalation of firepower "as a declaration of war and have responded accordingly".

None of the efforts by Petraeus and others to reach a deal with moderate leaders and divide the Taliban has come to fruition. However, the venal political establishment in Kabul that does Washington's bidding is deeply divided.

After months of delay, President Hamid Karzai finally succumbed to US and international pressure and agreed to swear in parliament this week. Previously he had insisted that he would only do so once a special court into electoral irregularities had brought down its findings. Karzai established the court, which his rivals claimed was unconstitutional, in an effort to alter the balance of parliament in his favour. Broad layers of the Afghan population regard Karzai and his opponents as nothing but puppets of the foreign occupation.

The Obama administration had planned to begin withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan by the middle of this year. But there is a steady drumbeat from US military commanders for the date to be delayed. In his letter, Petraeus ignored the July 2011 deadline and nominated the "end of 2014" for the longer-term goal for the Afghan military to be "in the lead" for the country's security.

In mid-January, Afghan foreign minister Zalmai Rassoul, obviously concerned about the precarious position of the puppet government, told the media that the US military should "definitely" stay beyond the 2014 deadline. Whatever the exact size of US forces, the only way in which the US can achieve its objective of transforming Afghanistan into a strategic base of operations in Central Asia and the Middle East is by continuing its criminal and bloody war of attrition to suppress the Afghan population.

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