

US occupation in Afghanistan hit by string of bombings

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A series of bombings have signaled the beginning of a spring offensive by the Afghan resistance forces, while inflicting the greatest single-day casualties on US-led occupation forces in nearly a year.

Two separate attacks last Saturday claimed the lives of eight NATO soldiers, the deadliest day for the occupation since June of last year.

The bloodiest attack was at a desert base near Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. A man wearing the uniform of the Afghan army walked into a room where about 40 US and Afghan troops were meeting and detonated an explosive vest he was wearing. Five US soldiers were killed together with four Afghan troops and an interpreter. A number of others were wounded.

A spokesman for the Taliban said that the attacker was a soldier who had been in contact with the armed resistance for a “long time” and had been assigned to the base where the bombing took place about a month ago.

Three more soldiers were killed Saturday by an improvised explosive device in the south of the country. While NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) did not announce the nationality of the dead, the US has the vast majority of troops in the area.

High-profile attacks continued on Monday, with an assault on the Afghan Defense Ministry, one of Kabul’s most heavily guarded buildings, which sits adjacent to the presidential palace. There another man wearing an Afghan army uniform and an explosive vest—and equipped with a Defense Ministry pass—managed to breach security. He opened fire in the ministry offices, killing two people and injuring seven, including high-level officials. He was shot dead before he could detonate the explosives. Among the wounded were an assistant to the defense minister and the secretary of the Afghan army’s chief of staff.

The Taliban took credit for this attack as well, announcing that its intended targets had been the Afghan defense minister and his visiting French counterpart, Gerard Longuet. After the bombing, Longuet cancelled a scheduled meeting at the ministry.

In a separate incident Monday, a roadside bomb killed seven Afghan police officers in the Ghazni province of central

Afghanistan.

The attack on the ministry marked the tenth suicide bombing or bombing attempt in barely a week. In one of these attacks, a man wearing a police uniform managed to sneak into the heavily guarded police compound in Kandahar city and kill the provincial police chief, Khan Mohammad Mujahid.

US and Afghan officials tried to minimize the significance of the attacks, claiming that they were an indication that the armed resistance groups were unable to mount major battles against the US-led forces and therefore were forced to resort to assassinations.

“The insurgents took significant losses in the past year, 2010, and what they will try to do is re-infiltrate those areas,” ISAF spokesman Lt. Col. John Dorrian told the media. “One of the ways they will attempt to do this is through assassinations.”

The success of these attacks, however, calls into question the central contention of the Pentagon and the Obama administration: that US-trained Afghan security forces will be ready to take over from the 100,000 American and 30,000 other foreign troops the task of suppressing the armed resistance.

Supposedly, this process is set to begin in July, with the Obama administration promising to withdraw an unspecified number of American soldiers and Marines.

Last Friday, in an interview with the Associated Press, President Barack Obama refused to give any indication of how many troops would be withdrawn.

“I’m not going to give a number yet,” said Obama. “Gen. [David] Petraeus is providing me with an assessment. Obviously all these things depend on the conditions on the ground.” While promising the troop withdrawal would be more than “just a token gesture,” he reiterated that he was waiting for “Gen. Petraeus to give me a clear recommendation.”

Clearly, the US military brass, which remains convinced that the correct application of sufficient American fire power and the execution of the right set of counterinsurgency tactics can defeat the Afghan resistance, will set the agenda, meaning that there will be no major reduction of the US occupation. The military command wants to maintain present troop levels indefinitely.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates declared last month that the onset of Afghanistan’s traditional fighting season would be the

“acid test” for the Obama administration’s “surge” of troops into the nearly 10-year-old US war.

The warmer weather in Afghanistan allows the Afghan resistance to cross through mountain passes from sanctuaries on the Pakistan border and launch attacks. The Pentagon and US commanders in Afghanistan have claimed that the “surge,” which saw the Obama administration pour 30,000 more US troops into the country last year, has fundamentally changed the strategic situation, making it impossible for the so-called insurgents to make headway in their traditional strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar in the south, where the bulk of the American forces were deployed.

“We start this year in a very different place from last year,” Gen. Petraeus told the *Washington Post*. In an article published Saturday, the *Post* provided some insight into the “success” of the US occupation in the south, which it said was the “result of intense fighting and the use of high-impact weapons systems not normally associated with the protect-the-population counterinsurgency mission.”

It described the attack on one village, Tarok Kolache, upon which the US military dropped 25 tons of explosives. The battalion commander who directed the offensive bragged that he had turned it into “a parking lot.” According to the *Post*, “the unit went on to flatten parts of three other nearby villages.”

Whatever temporary peace may be bought by such scorched earth tactics in the south—Petraeus described the supposed gains as “fragile and reversible”—US officers acknowledge that the resistance is making gains in the east, resuming control over areas evacuated by the American military.

Meanwhile, the spiraling hostility of the Afghan population toward foreign occupation continues to erupt into bloody clashes.

A protest Monday over the arrest by US-led occupation troops of religious scholars accused of being insurgents turned into a mass demonstration numbering at least 3,000 in the town of Charikar, about 30 miles north of Kabul. The crowd blocked the Kabul–Mazar-i-Sharif road for several hours.

Police and troops fired on the demonstration, killing three people and wounding another 25.

In what appears to reflect growing frustration with US policy in both Afghanistan and the region, the government of Pakistan has launched a high-level initiative to broker a peace deal between the Taliban and other armed resistance groups and the government of US-backed President Hamid Karzai.

Last weekend, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, the country’s military intelligence chief Lt. Gen. Ahmad Shuja Pasha and the head of the army, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, traveled jointly to Kabul for talks with the Afghan government.

The two governments agreed to set up a joint commission for “reconciliation” in Afghanistan.

“A war in Afghanistan can destabilize Pakistan and vice versa,” said the Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani. “We are

firmly supporting the strategy of reconciliation and we are with our brother Pakistan,” he added.

For his part, Karzai described the talks as “a fundamental departure from our meetings in the past.”

Coming at a time that is universally described as the most acrimonious in terms of US-Pakistani relations since September 11, 2001, when US officials threatened to attack Pakistan, the initiative appears to be an attempt to undercut Washington’s policy in the region.

As the *New York Times* noted: “The Americans have been coaxing the Afghan and Pakistani leaderships to talk to each other, but not at the cost of keeping the United States out of the loop, or of concocting solutions that are against American interests.”

These “interests” are understood within Pakistan to include a permanent US military presence in Afghanistan for the purpose of exerting American hegemony over the energy resources of—and pipeline routes from—the Caspian Basin and countering the influence of both China and Pakistan itself.

Speaking on Monday after a meeting with a US congressional delegation led by House Speaker John Boehner, Prime Minister Gilani reiterated Pakistan’s demand for a halt to CIA drone attacks in the tribal areas near the Afghan border.

The Obama administration has more than doubled the number of these attacks over the last year, killing at least 670 people in over 100 separate strikes. This slaughter from the air has provoked rising popular anger throughout Pakistan.

The Pakistani daily *Dawn* reported Monday that, in a ratcheting up of pressure on Washington, the Pakistani government will halt supplies passing through Pakistan to US-led troops in Afghanistan for two days, on April 23 and 24. The reason given for the blockade is a sit-in demonstration called in Peshawar by a political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice), to protest the drone attacks.

Citing government sources, *Dawn* reported that “the federal and provincial government decided to stop NATO oil tankers and food supplies during the protests to avoid any incidents of violence.”



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