

Afghan army trainee kills three Australian soldiers

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Three Australian soldiers were killed in northern Kandahar province on Saturday by a member of the sixth battalion of the fourth brigade of the Afghan National Army (ANA) that they were training. The incident took place amid a rising number of attacks by anti-occupation fighters and supporters against targets and in areas considered secure.

Also on Saturday, a suicide bomber in Kabul slammed his car, laden with over 700 kg of explosives, into a heavily-armoured US “Rhino” bus. One Canadian and four US soldiers were killed along with eight military contractors, in the most deadly ground attack in the heavily secured capital since the beginning of the occupation. Three nearby Afghan civilians were also killed in the blast. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack and said the bomber had tracked the Rhino on seven occasions before executing his plan.

The Australian soldiers—Lance Corporal Luke Gavin, 27, Captain Bryce Duffy, 26, and Corporal Ashley Birt, 22—were shot dead by an Afghan trainee soldier known only as Darwish. An Afghan interpreter was also killed in the attack. Seven other Australian soldiers who have not been named were wounded, one critically, and are now awaiting transfer to a US military hospital in Germany.

The Australians were from the “Mentoring Task Force” (MTF) training ANA soldiers at Shah Wali Kot base in Kandahar Province. During a weekly parade by the sixth battalion, Darwish, a trusted non-commissioned officer, gunned down the 11 men from behind. Two Australians returned fire, killing their assailant.

Australian personnel feared the attack was part of a Taliban assault on the base or that Darwish was part of a team of hostile ANA soldiers planning to overwhelm the base from within. Underscoring the tensions between the trainers and soldiers, the more than 200 Afghan soldiers were disarmed and confined to their barracks. They have now been released, but their weapons have not been returned.

Last weekend brings the total number of Australian casualties to 32. This year was the deadliest yet for Australian troops in Afghanistan, with 11 soldiers killed and 42 injured. Of these, 15 were from the MTF and were killed after October 2009.

In the wake of the attack, Australian government ministers portrayed it as an isolated and almost inexplicable incident. Prime Minister Julia Gillard doubted whether they would ever know “the answer to the most searching question, which is why the shooting occurred.”

The reality is that the incident is one of a series of attacks on occupying forces by members of the Afghan army and security forces. On May 30, 25-year-old Lance-Corporal Andrew Jones, an army cook with the Mentoring Task Force, was shot by an ANA soldier, who was then hunted down and executed by US forces.

The US-led occupation is broadly hated by Afghans. Far from bringing peace and democracy, the decade-long war has resulted in widespread social misery and the installation of the corrupt puppet regime led by Hamid Karzai. Foreign and Afghan troops routinely ride roughshod over democratic rights. Indiscriminate

night-time raids, the slaughter of civilians by remote-controlled drones and fighter planes, along with arbitrary arrests and torture, has provided the Taliban, with sympathisers and recruits at every level of Afghan society.

Taliban and other insurgent groups have been consistently able to bypass high-level security to assassinate government and senior personnel. In July, a bodyguard for Karzai's half brother Ahmad Wali was killed at his residence in Kabul by a longstanding bodyguard whom the Taliban claimed had been placed there as a "sleeper". Just a week later, Jan Mohammed Khan, a chief presidential adviser, was assassinated after three insurgents infiltrated his compound.

More recently, on September 20, the Afghan government's chief peace negotiator Burhanuddin Rabbani was killed in his home by a suicide-bomber informant, who was invited through security on the promise of providing vital information. Just five days later, an Afghan employee at the CIA headquarters in Kabul shot dead a CIA officer.

Speaking in the Australian parliament after last weekend's deaths, Prime Minister Julia Gillard reaffirmed her government's commitment to the criminal war in Afghanistan. "We must not allow this attack ... to strike at the core of our training and mentoring mission in Afghanistan ... We must stand firmly by our ally, the United States," she declared.

Gillard was installed last year in a backroom coup that ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister in part because of her slavish support for the US alliance. Whereas Rudd had resisted pressure from President Obama to play a greater military role in Afghanistan, Gillard has expanded the Australian presence. In September, Gillard lifted the previous limitation confining Australian military trainers to the province of Uruzgan and authorised their deployment in Kandahar at Shah Wali Kot.

The US-led "surge" initiated by Obama in 2009 was predicated on the assumption that occupying forces would be able to withdraw by 2014 and leave control of the country in the hands of Afghan forces. In a report to

parliament on October 13, Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith claimed the MTF had made "important progress" in its training operations and declared: "On current advice and projections, the [fourth] brigade, as a whole, is expected to be operationally viable and ready for provincial transition by 2014."

These claims have now been dealt yet another shattering blow by last weekend's killings. Far from "stabilising" Afghanistan, the continued presence of foreign troops is generating deep-seated enmity that will inevitably lead to further attacks.

Several hours after the killing at Shah Wali Kot, Australian soldiers gunned down an Afghan civilian on his motorbike at Tarin Kot, in Uruzgan. The soldiers were reportedly securing a site for a meeting of the "provincial reconstruction team" and had undoubtedly been placed on higher alert.

A witness at the incident named Musa Jan told the *Australian* that the 21-year-old victim had been approaching a checkpoint when "the shooting started. There were no hands raised [to indicate to stop], no speech, they just shot him, shot him, shot him." Another local was quoted as demanding, "Is this your response to what happened in Shah Wali Kot?"



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