

Another year of death and destruction in the AfPak War

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The tenth year of the US and NATO occupation of Afghanistan was among the deadliest and most destructive of the entire conflict. In 2011, over 140,000 US and foreign troops conducted intense operations in southern Afghanistan to try and crush the insurgency being fought by the Islamist Taliban and other resistance organisations, while the CIA continued its illegal drone strikes against alleged insurgent targets in the tribal border regions of north west Pakistan.

The killing of a British soldier on December 3 in an explosion in the southern province of Helmand brought the overall death toll among the US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan for 2011 to 566. Only 2010 was more costly, the first year of the Obama administration's "surge" that sent tens of thousands of additional troops into combat in some of the most volatile areas of the country. A total of 711 American and foreign personnel lost their lives that year.

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were used as the pretext to invade Afghanistan and establish a US military footprint in Central Asia, a total of 1,864 American and 723 other foreign troops have been killed. At least 20,000 have suffered wounds or injuries, not counting the tens of thousands who have developed serious psychological conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Armed Afghan resistance to the occupation continued unabated in 2011, extending into high security areas of Kabul and other cities. Key figures in the US-backed puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai have been among the targets. Some of the most prominent incidents were the assassination of Karzai's half-brother and key regime powerbroker, Ahmed Wali

Karzai, in July; the September assault on the US embassy in Kabul; and the killing of former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani a week later, as he met with men claiming to be Taliban peace negotiators.

With far less media attention, Afghan police were being killed at the rate of at least eight per day by the middle of the year. More than 2,000 police lost their lives during 2011, along with hundreds of Afghan Army personnel.

The extent of insurgent infiltration into the Afghan government and security forces, as well as broad popular hostility to the occupation, was underscored by a string of cases in which Afghan soldiers killed or wounded foreign troops inside their bases.

There is no end to the fighting in sight, despite the Taliban suffering large casualties. While there are no accurate figures as to how many Afghans have lost their lives fighting the occupation, a Wikipedia tally based on press reports of insurgent deaths estimates that at least 4,275 were killed in the last nine months of 2011 alone. Since the war began, the death toll among Afghan combatants would easily exceed 50,000.

Insurgents continue to be able to recruit fighters, however, due to popular hatred of the occupation and the Karzai government, and the desperate conditions that face the population.

A further worsening of poverty and deprivation is expected in the coming year. For all the billions of dollars in so-called reconstruction and other aid, at least two thirds of Afghans do not receive sufficient food. Unemployment across the country is estimated to be at

least 50 percent. The population of Kabul has swelled from barely a million in 2001 to over four million today. People unable to support themselves through traditional agriculture have flooded into the capital to access international food relief. The squalid slums that surround the city have no electricity, sewerage or safe water supplies.

The United Nations warned last month that malnutrition will soar over the coming year. The financial crisis afflicting the major economies has seen contributions to the World Food Program slashed. The UN has raised barely half of the \$400 million spent in 2011 to supply emergency food assistance to an estimated 7.3 million people in Afghanistan.

The UN will later this month release its estimate of the 2011 Afghan civilian death toll. It has previously reported that in the first half of the year, there were more than 1,400 civilian deaths, mostly due to insurgent explosions. The UN data, however, significantly underestimates the real toll of the war, especially the civilian casualties inflicted by US forces. An analysis of US-NATO military data, published last November by the Inter Press Service news agency, indicated that in less than 10 months in 2010 and early 2011, more than 1,500 civilians were killed in night raids—making “US night raids by far the largest cause of civilian casualties in the war in Afghanistan”.

Hundreds of people, many of them civilians, have also been killed in north west Pakistan by US drone attacks. Thousands more have been killed, and millions displaced, by Pakistani military operations in recent years against Islamist tribal rebels who have provided safe havens and assistance to Afghan anti-occupation fighters.

Popular opposition inside Pakistan to the Afghan occupation, and the collaboration of the Pakistani government with continuous US violations of its sovereignty, has deepened the country’s political crisis. In retaliation for the killing of 26 Pakistani soldiers by a US air strike in November, the Islamabad regime felt compelled to shut down all land shipments of food, fuel, and other supplies to US-NATO forces.

The Obama administration’s only “solution” to the quagmire in Afghanistan is another year of military carnage, while it attempts to meet its promises to withdraw the 40,000 “surge” troops before the presidential election.

At the same time, it is making overtures to the Taliban and other insurgent leaderships to enter into peace negotiations. Over the past several weeks, reports have appeared in the international press announcing the establishment of a Taliban “liaison office” in the Gulf state of Qatar, where meetings could take place to discuss the possible terms of a settlement. Any “peace” deal under the auspices of the US would only be a tragedy for the Afghan people. After a decade of US-led occupation, the result would be an anti-democratic regime in Kabul fashioned to meet Washington’s strategic and economic interests and presiding over a country devastated by war and a people mired in poverty.



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