

US Afghan strategy unravels in wake of Kandahar massacre

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The political reverberations continue to grow from last Sunday's US massacre of 16 Afghan civilians, the majority of them children, in Kandahar province. Thursday saw the Taliban breaking off talks with Washington and President Hamid Karzai demanding that US-NATO forces withdraw to their main bases. Together, these actions threaten to leave key elements of the Obama administration's Afghanistan strategy in tatters.

Popular anger over the killings spilled into the streets again Thursday, with thousands marching in the city of Qalat in Zabul province, near Kandahar, where the massacre took place. The demonstrators carried white flags and chanted slogans against the US-led occupation and demanding that the US soldier accused of slaughtering the Afghan civilians be brought before an Afghan court for trial.

Even larger demonstrations are anticipated Friday, a day that has traditionally seen Afghans stage mass protests after leaving mosques after prayers on the Muslim holy day.

The Pentagon has already quietly spirited the 38-year-old staff sergeant, who is said to have confessed to the killings, out of the country. Military sources said that he had been taken to Kuwait, on the pretext that Afghanistan lacks appropriate pre-trial detention facilities. Military officials have refused until now to release publicly the name of the accused killer.

Under a status of forces agreement dictated by Washington to the regime in Kabul, US troops are given "a status equivalent to that accorded to the administrative and technical staff" of the US Embassy under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and are deemed immune from any prosecution under Afghan law. Washington is not about to waive this agreement and allow the massacre's perpetrator to be tried anywhere outside of a US military court.

It is widely expected that the staff sergeant, an 11-year Army veteran and sniper with three tours in Iraq, will face a court martial at his home base, Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state. A civilian lawyer from Seattle, Washington, John Henry Browne, revealed Thursday that he

had been asked by the alleged killer to represent him in court. The staff sergeant will also have a military lawyer.

The defense of this US military immunity in the Kandahar massacre case has provoked popular anger in Afghanistan. Afghan legislators Thursday called upon Karzai's US-backed government to refuse to sign a strategic partnership agreement with Washington unless the sergeant is tried in Afghanistan.

"It was the demand of the families of the martyrs of this incident, the people of Kandahar and the people of Afghanistan to try him publicly in Afghanistan," said Mohammad Naeem Lalai Hamidzai, a Kandahar legislator who is a member of the parliamentary commission charged with investigating the massacre.

This threat to abort the strategic partnership negotiations, which have been going on for a year now, was joined Thursday by a statement from President Karzai calling for the pullback of all US and NATO forces from Afghan villages and into major base facilities. The demand, which followed immediately upon talks between Karzai and US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, was said to be aimed at halting the escalation of Afghan civilian casualties that has accompanied the US military "surge" initiated by the Obama administration in December 2009.

The US occupation operates as a law unto itself and feels in no way bound by the demands of Karzai, who is its puppet.

A key issue in the negotiations over the strategic partnership agreement is Karzai's demand that the US military halt special forces night raids, which have caused a disproportionate share of civilian casualties and are seen as a humiliation by Afghans forced to endure the breaking down of their doors and the manhandling of their families in the middle of the night. While continuing to talk, the US military has ignored Karzai's demand, insisting that the night raids are critical to its strategy of hunting down and killing suspected members of the armed resistance.

Significantly, the sergeant accused in the killings was attached to one of the special forces units engaged in

“village stabilization operations,” seen by the US military as critical to Washington’s strategy for drawing down US forces. Its key task is the organization of units of the “Afghan Local Police,” a new category of armed forces created in 2010, essentially village-level militias, often under the direction of local strongmen. These militias are supposed to hold areas cleared of resistance by the US offensive. Human rights groups have charged these armed groups with death squad murders, torture and various forms of criminality.

Acceding to Karzai’s latest demand would effectively spell a halt not only to this project, but to all US combat operations in Afghanistan, just as the Pentagon brass is gearing up for a new military offensive in the eastern part of the country, along the Pakistan border.

Karzai himself is in no hurry to see the US and NATO military presence draw to a close. He and his corrupt coterie know that his regime would never survive without the armed protection and funding provided by the US and the other imperialist powers. At the same time, however, he fears that the anger of the Afghanistan people over US war crimes will produce a groundswell of support for the resistance that will also lead to his downfall.

The Obama administration’s so-called “endgame” had been to bleed the armed resistance to US occupation into submission by means of the surge, which brought the US troops deployment in Afghanistan to over 100,000. On that basis, Washington is prepared to draw down occupation forces while working to secure some sort of peace deal, or even a power-sharing agreement, with the Taliban. This would be coupled with a long-term security pact with Kabul that would secure permanent bases in Afghanistan for the US military and the indefinite deployment of thousands of US troops in the guise of “advisers” and “trainers.”

While the administration has pledged to reduce troop levels to 68,000 by September 2012, it has provided no further deadlines for withdrawals between then and the end of 2014, when all “combat forces” are supposed to be out of Afghanistan. The US military high command has opposed setting further reductions, and, as Obama said this week, he is committed to keeping a “robust” force in the country.

Now preliminary talks with the Taliban have apparently broken down, with the Islamist movement issuing a statement saying that “the shaky, erratic and vague standpoint of the Americans” rendered the talks pointless.

The Taliban had set up an office in Qatar and held preliminary meetings with US representatives beginning last January. Talks reportedly centered on a proposed prisoner exchange, which would have traded an American soldier captured in 2009 for Taliban members held at US prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Apparently, Washington attempted to impose conditions upon the talks, such as including in the negotiations representatives of the Karzai regime, which the Taliban considers illegitimate.

While there was no mention in the Taliban statement of the massacre in Kandahar, it may well see it as creating more favorable conditions for resisting the occupation.

The Obama administration and the Pentagon have insisted that last Sunday’s massacre was an aberration that, as Obama put it recently, “does not represent our military”. This war crime is seen in Afghanistan, however, as precisely representative of a decade of killings of civilians and other systematic abuses that are the inevitable product of colonial-style occupation.

It comes after a long string of highly-publicized outrages, including the recent trial of a US Army “kill team” that murdered Afghan civilians and cut off body parts for trophies, the video last January of US Marines urinating on the corpses of slain Afghans and last month’s burning of copies of the Koran at a garbage dump, which triggered nationwide riots that killed at least 30, including six American soldiers.

In another event that calls into serious question the Pentagon’s unfailingly positive view of US progress in Afghanistan, the US military was compelled to acknowledge that it had significantly underestimated the seriousness of an incident that took place Wednesday, when a man drove a truck onto the runway at the Camp Bastion airport in Helmand, just as the plane bringing Defense Secretary Panetta was arriving there.

It has since emerged that the individual driving the truck, which had been stolen from an Afghan soldier, was an Afghan interpreter working for the US-led occupation. He died on Thursday from severe burns suffered when he apparently tried to ignite the vehicle. Pentagon officials admitted Thursday that the interpreter was trying to run down a group of US Marines assigned to meet the aircraft.

The incident underscored both the lack of security in an area supposedly secured by the US surge, as well as the continuing proliferation of so-called green-on-blue violence, the term used by the US military to describe attacks against it by Afghan security forces that are supposedly its allies.



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