

Attacks force US to halt joint operations with Afghan troops

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19 September 2012

A steady escalation of so-called insider attacks has forced the Pentagon to indefinitely suspend all joint patrols and combat training with Afghan security forces, effectively upending Washington's strategy for maintaining US control over Afghanistan.

ISAF, the NATO umbrella for the decade-old US-led occupation, announced on Tuesday that it was suspending joint operations below battalion level. The order was issued by Lt. Gen. James Terry, the second highest ranking US officer in Afghanistan. It reportedly came without any warning to British commanders and other NATO forces.

The move follows a series of attacks on US-NATO troops over the weekend and comes amid mounting popular outrage against the United States triggered by a provocative anti-Muslim film posted on the Internet. Violent demonstrations that have swept the Middle East, North Africa and Asia have erupted in Afghanistan as well.

Tuesday saw a suicide bombing near Kabul airport that killed 14 people, including eight South African employees of an aviation company working under contract for the US occupation. Hezb-i-Islami, an armed opposition group, claimed responsibility for the attack. It said it was in retaliation for the anti-Muslim film and had been carried out by a female suicide bomber.

Of greatest concern to the US occupation command are the so-called "green-on-blue" or "insider" attacks, in which members of the Afghan army and police have turned their guns on American or other foreign troops training or patrolling with them.

Such an attack claimed the lives of four US troops and wounded two others on Sunday in southern Zabul province. Afghan police opened fire on the American soldiers at a checkpoint in the Mazan district. Just the

day before, two British soldiers were shot to death by an Afghan policeman at a checkpoint in the Nahr-e Saraj district of Helmand province, also in the south of the country.

In a third attack on Sunday evening, an Afghan soldier at a base in Helmand fired on a vehicle, wounding civilian contract workers. He said afterwards that he had believed that foreign occupation troops were in the vehicle when he attacked it.

These latest attacks bring to 51 the number US and other foreign troops killed by their supposed allies in the Afghan security forces since the year began.

The US military has never in its history confronted such attacks from ostensibly allied forces fielded by a local puppet regime. While the Pentagon alternately attempted to dismiss the killings as the product of unrelated individual grievances or the work of Taliban infiltrators, the growing number and widespread character of the attacks are an expression of the intense popular hostility to the US-led occupation, now in its eleventh year.

The US-led command in Afghanistan linked the order curtailing joint operations with Afghan forces to the wave of outrage that has swept the Muslim world and Afghanistan itself. The country has seen demonstrations erupt in violent clashes outside Camp Phoenix, a US base on the outskirts of Kabul, on Monday, and in the northern city of Kunduz on Tuesday, where several hundred university students set fire to pictures of President Barack Obama and battled police.

"Recent events outside of and inside Afghanistan related to the 'Innocence of Muslims' video, plus the conduct of recent insider attacks, have given cause for ISAF troops to exercise increased vigilance and carefully review all activities and interactions with the

local population,” said ISAF spokesman Jamie Graybeal.

Last February saw a surge in such killings, amid angry demonstrations provoked by an incident in which US troops tried to burn copies of the Koran at a military base garbage dump. Among the dead then were two senior US officers shot execution-style inside the Afghan interior ministry in Kabul.

But these attacks have continued unabated without the need of additional religious provocations.

General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave a candid assessment Sunday of the significance of the “green-on-blue” attacks, describing them as “a very serious threat” to US military strategy in Afghanistan. “We’re all seized with the problem,” he said. “You can’t whitewash it.”

Yet in the wake of these comments, US and NATO officials set out precisely to “whitewash” the deep-going crisis the attacks have created within the US-led occupation. Speaking in Tokyo Monday, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta attributed the insider attacks to the Taliban, describing them as “kind of a last gasp effort to be able to not only target our forces, but to try to create chaos, because they’ve been unable—unable to regain any of the territory that they have lost.”

Panetta insisted that the attacks would not disrupt Washington’s “basic plan” and that the US military would continue “transitioning areas to Afghan security and governance.”

Similarly, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen described the halt to joint operations as a “prudent and temporary” measure, adding that “our strategy remains the same.”

The reality, however, is that the attacks and the resulting breakdown of trust between US occupation troops and the Afghan puppet forces have called the US strategy into serious question.

This strategy calls for the US and its NATO allies to train some 350,000 Afghan security forces to conduct counter-insurgency operations after US combat forces are withdrawn at the end of 2014. The plan envisions an estimated 20,000 US troops remaining in the country after that date, with small units embedded in the Afghan forces as “trainers” and “advisers”, while US special operations hunter-killer squads continue carrying out attacks.

This week’s order to curtail joint operations follows a

Pentagon directive earlier this month that ended training by US Special Forces of the so-called Afghan Local Police, a collection of village militias set up by the Pentagon that have been implicated in human rights abuses and corruption. Last month, members of an ALP unit shot and killed two US Special Forces troops.

NATO spokesmen in Afghanistan claimed that training and advising Afghan units was continuing “on the battalion level.” What this means is that smaller units are not participating directly alongside Afghan forces in the field, which is resulting in paralysis. Few Afghan units are judged by the US military as capable of operating on their own.

An Afghan general in Helmand province made this clear to the *Washington Post*. “It will be really difficult for us to conduct any operation without the NATO troops’ presence on the ground, because we really need them,” said the general.

The *Post* reported that in Wardak province, south of Kabul, after US forces were pulled from joint operations, “Afghan army commanders ... decided not to patrol without support from US troops and cancelled planned missions.”

The rosy assessments provided by Panetta and Rasmussen notwithstanding, the changes in relations between US-NATO occupation troops and Afghan puppet forces in response to the “green on blue” attacks calls into question the withdrawal timetable, raising the threat that larger numbers of US troops will have to remain in Afghanistan indefinitely.

This crisis is unfolding under conditions in which neither of the two major parties have brought the issue of Afghanistan into the US 2012 presidential election. Whatever strategy is pursued to secure US imperialist interests in the country will be worked out behind the backs of the American people.



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