

# Ten girls die in Afghanistan explosion as US pushes for permanent presence

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The horror of the protracted US intervention in Afghanistan was driven home again on Monday as at least 10 young Afghan girls, ages nine to eleven, were blown to pieces in what local authorities said was a landmine explosion. Two other girls were badly wounded and reported in critical condition at a local hospital.

The girls were gathering firewood in eastern Nangarhar province when they accidentally set off a buried mine with an ax. A police spokesman said that the mine was not located near a road or any other evident target, and that another old, unexploded mine was found nearby.

Afghanistan has the highest number of landmine and unexploded ordnance casualties in the world, with 102 people killed or injured between July and September of this year alone. The large number of mines planted in the country is for the most part the bitter legacy of the three decades of warfare that began in 1979, when the Carter administration launched a covert CIA operation to arm and finance Islamist mujahedin to fight a Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

Another blast Monday on the outskirts of Kabul ripped through the headquarters of a major US military contractor. The explosion killed at least one Afghan and left as many as 30 people wounded when a suicide bomber set off explosives loaded onto a small truck outside the offices of Contrack International, a Virginia-based company that builds bases and other facilities for the US military. The wounded included American, Afghan and South African employees of the contractor, whose offices were demolished in the blast.

The attack, which took place on Jalalabad road, a major thoroughfare that is flanked by foreign companies and military bases, underscored the ability of the Taliban and other armed opposition groups to

strike at what is supposedly the most secure area in the country.

The latest bloodshed came in the wake of a new report issued by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) last Friday that indicated a 28 percent increase in civilian casualties between August and October compared to the same period last year. The number listed as killed rose to 967, with another 1,590 wounded during those three months.

The UN agency blamed the “vast majority” of the casualties on “anti-government elements.” The Taliban sharply disputed the report’s conclusions charging that the UN, which has sanctioned the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, had deliberately failed to record the civilian casualties caused by US-NATO operations and bombardments.

Amid the rising bloodshed, the Obama administration is pressing forward in negotiations with the US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai to make Washington’s military presence in Afghanistan permanent.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta paid a surprise two-day visit to Kabul last week, holding talks with US commanders on the state of the US-led war, now in its 12th year, and on plans to keep a military force in Afghanistan after the December 2014 formal deadline for ending the US-led occupation.

Panetta also met with Karzai. In a joint press conference following their discussions on December 13, the Pentagon chief stressed Washington’s “long term” commitment to Afghanistan. “Just as the strategic partnership agreement signed by President Obama and President Karzai made clear, America will not turn away from Afghanistan,” said Panetta. “We will continue to have an enduring presence beyond 2014 into the future.”

In answer to a reporter's question about the fate of Afghanistan after a 2014 US withdrawal, the defense secretary replied, "Well, first and foremost, we're not departing Afghanistan ... we will be there to provide support, to provide training, to provide assistance, to provide help on counterterrorism, and to provide support for the forces that are here."

The US currently has some 66,000 troops in Afghanistan, following the Obama administration's withdrawal of the "surge" forces it began sending in in December 2009. The Pentagon has indicated that no recommendations—much less decisions—have been made on further withdrawals over the course of the coming year. Top military commanders had previously voiced the view that the present force should remain intact through the 2013 "fighting season," ending in November.

As for the numbers of troops to remain in Afghanistan after 2014, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that unnamed US officials had cited "preliminary military recommendations to keep 6,000 to 15,000 troops for training and counterterrorism missions." Earlier reports put the figure at closer to 20,000 to 30,000. The discrepancy may be more apparent than real, given the military's ability to continuously rotate into the country forces on temporary tours of duty.

Panetta said that Obama would make a decision about post-2014 troop levels within "a few weeks."

US commanders have said that Afghan puppet forces would remain dependent upon the US military for air and artillery support, intelligence and surveillance as well as training. US military forces would remain embedded in every Afghan battalion, exerting effective control. Meanwhile, a sizable contingent of special operations troops would remain in the country, continuing the night raids and assassinations that have aroused intense popular hatred of the more than decade-old US occupation.

The *Wall Street Journal* quoted Marine Gen. Lawrence Nicholson, the deputy chief of staff for US-NATO operations, as saying that after 2014, the US military will no longer provide medical evacuation by helicopter for the Afghan army, meaning that wounded troops would have to be brought to medical facilities by ground transportation. The effect will be a dramatic increase in fatalities among the Afghan puppet forces,

under conditions in which they have already been rising precipitously, even as casualties have fallen for US troops.

The discussions and negotiations over the post-2014 US military presence in Afghanistan underscore the fact that the Obama administration is continuing the pursuit of the original aims underlying the invasion of 2001. Washington is determined to cement its military domination over the country to provide US imperialism with a base of operations to assert its hegemony over Central Asia and its vast energy resources and to threaten its regional rivals, particularly the bordering countries of Iran and China.



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