

Afghanistan: Sharp rise in civilian deaths

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While the US and its allies claim that the situation in Afghanistan “stabilised” in 2012, in preparation for a security handover to Afghan forces in 2014, increasing civilian casualties, daily drone strikes and a mounting social crisis reveal the real situation after more than a decade of US occupation.

According to a report released by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan on December 14, at least 967 civilians were killed, and another 1,590 were injured in the third quarter of 2012. The figures indicate a 28 percent rise in civilian deaths between August 1 and October 31, compared to the corresponding period in 2011.

Statistics released by the US in early November showed that the US military had carried out 333 drone strikes in Afghanistan in the first 10 months of 2012. The average of 33 drone strikes per month was reportedly far higher than at any time in the 11-year US occupation. The monthly average in 2011 was 24.5.

The drone strikes are surging alongside a decrease in the number of US troops, with 34,000 soldiers fewer than early 2011, during Obama’s troop surge. In other words, a central component of the US “transition” in Afghanistan is a deadly drone campaign, which has resulted in an unknown number of civilian casualties. Peter W. Singer of the Brookings Institution described the drone strikes as a “regularised air war”.

As of early December, 301 US troops had died in Afghanistan during 2012. The number of casualties declined from 413 in 2011, and a high of 500 in 2010, largely as a result of the declining number of ground troops. Even so, in September, the total number of US casualties since the 2001 invasion reached 2,000. Deaths among Afghan police and military personnel are much higher. According to the Afghan Defence Ministry, around 300 are dying each month.

Throughout 2012, so-called “green-on-blue” incidents—attacks by Afghan soldiers and police on

their American counterparts—highlighted the broad opposition in Afghanistan to the US occupation. By late November, 60 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops had been killed in such attacks in 2012, according to official calculations, representing 16 percent of total ISAF casualties.

Most recently, an Afghan policewoman shot and killed an American trainer on December 24. A Reuters report revealed that the woman lived in dire poverty, with raw sewage and stagnant water in the lanes around her damp and cold two-room concrete home. Her 16-year-old son Sayid said his mother, who may also have suffered from mental illness, “was usually complaining about poverty. She was complaining to my father about our conditions.”

While statistics are scanty, the number of newly displaced people indicates that the social crisis continues to worsen. According to the UN, 481,877 people are classified as internally displaced. Almost 200,000 of them were first recorded in 2012, with 91,095 of them actually displaced during the year. The statistics for November point to an escalating trend, with almost 33,000 people recorded as newly displaced that month, and more than 8,000 actually displaced in that month. Some 78 percent of those newly displaced in November were from the central region, which has been a focal point of fighting.

Aid organisations have raised concerns that this winter will produce a humanitarian disaster, with more than 2 million people estimated to be at risk from cold, malnutrition and disease. Last winter saw the lowest temperatures and the highest snowfall in 15 years, resulting in scores of children dying in the shanty settlements around Kabul. Millions of people were affected nationally.

Yet more evidence of US abuses came in a report from the US State Department to the UN in early December. It revealed that the American military had

detained about 200 teenagers at a prison next to Bagram Air Base since 2008. The teenagers, mostly detained for over a year, were designated “enemy combatants” and denied the most basic legal rights. The report outlined a pseudo-legal rationale for abrogating the legal and democratic rights of minors, claiming that “the purpose of detention is not punitive but preventative: to prevent a combatant from returning to the battlefield.”

According to the report, the teenagers’ average age was 16. Civil liberties advocates noted that the low average age indicated that much younger children were detained.

Tina Foster, executive director of the International Justice Network, an organisation that represents detainees at Bagram, told the *Guardian*: “I’ve represented children as young as 11 or 12 who have been at Bagram.” She also questioned the number of 200, “because there are thousands of detainees at Parwan.” She added: “There are other children whose parents have said these children are under 18 at the time of their capture, and the US doesn’t allow the detainees or their families to contest their age.”

The figures are an indictment of the Obama administration and its reorientation of the American military from Iraq to Afghanistan and central Asia. In 2008, according to the US, 10 juveniles were held at Bagram, compared to around 500 in Iraq. Subsequently, the number at Bagram rose to at least 200.

Despite Washington’s claims of a “transition” of security responsibilities to Afghan forces in 2014, the US intends to maintain a large troop presence indefinitely. Defence Secretary Leon Panetta told a press conference in early December: “We will continue to have an enduring presence beyond 2014 into the future.” Recent media reports indicated that the US wants between 6,000 and 15,000 troops to remain beyond 2014, underscoring the neo-colonial objectives of the Afghan war from the outset.



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