

Hundreds of Afghan soldiers die in Taliban attack

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24 April 2017

At least 140 soldiers of the Afghan National Army were killed Friday in the deadliest Taliban attack since the Islamist regime's overthrow in the US-led invasion in 2001. Some local sources in the northern Afghan province of Balkh placed the death toll as high as 200.

The attack was conducted by a group of ten fighters, who managed to penetrate the army's largest base in the north of the country. The manner of the attack strongly suggests that the Taliban enjoyed inside support and demonstrates the increasing inability of the US puppet government led by President Ashraf Ghani to maintain control over the country.

The assailants, dressed in Afghan army fatigues, gained entry to the base in military vehicles before opening fire on the unarmed soldiers as they emerged from Friday prayers. Some of the attackers blew themselves up, with one blast killing 80 people, according to one source. It took a five-hour intervention by special commando forces to restore control over the base and kill all of the Taliban members.

Friday's attack is only the latest in a number of insurgent assaults on government institutions over recent months. In March, militants linked to ISIS entered the main military hospital in Kabul dressed as doctors and launched an attack that claimed more than 50 casualties. A dozen officers in the Afghan army, including two generals, were subsequently removed from their posts due to lapses prior to the incident.

Following Friday's attack, a number of parliamentary deputies and former security officials called on several senior figures to accept responsibility for the attack and resign, including Major General Mohmand Katawazai, the commander of the 209 Army Corps that occupied the base, Balkh Governor Atta Mohammad Noor, and Defense Minister Abdullah Habibi. The group also accused President Ghani of nepotism in his

appointments of leading military personnel.

The insurgency against the US-led occupation has continued to grow. According to information from the US special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction (SIGAR), the Afghan government controls just 52 percent of the country, with more than one third of provinces contested by insurgents and around 10 percent under the control of the Taliban. These figures come ahead of the Taliban's anticipated spring offensive, and show that despite investing hundreds of billions of dollars to establish a pro-Western puppet regime in Kabul, Washington has failed to establish a viable government.

The attack on the Afghan army base came less than a week after President Donald Trump's national security adviser, General H.R. McMaster, visited Kabul for talks with the Afghan government. The main purpose of the talks was to consider whether additional US military personnel would be required to turn the tide of the conflict. Currently, some 8,500 US troops operate in Afghanistan, nominally in the capacity of advising and assisting Afghan troops.

The latest attack, which has exposed once again the fragility of the US-trained forces, will only intensify calls for further US deployments.

The request for additional forces was made by the US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, to a congressional committee in February. Although no decision has yet been made about such a deployment, the comments of McMaster indicated that this is the direction the Trump administration will take. He said in a ToloNews interview that fighters who did not accept the Afghan government's offer of peace "will have to be defeated on battlefields," adding that Washington was "committed to give the Afghan state, the Afghan security forces, the strength they need."

A stepped-up US presence is even more likely given the deepening crisis facing the Afghan army and the mounting alienation felt by ordinary Afghans towards Washington's corrupt client regime in Kabul. As well as the apparent existence of elements that are facilitating the Taliban attacks within its ranks, the Afghan National Army is also suffering dramatic casualty rates. In 2016 alone there were more than 6,700 deaths.

Indicating the deep unpopularity of the Kabul government, many relatives of those killed in the latest Taliban attack and other Afghans expressed anger and frustration with the authorities. "Mothers lost their sons, sisters lost their brothers and wives lost their husbands. What is the government doing to prevent such atrocities, only condemning? I am so tired. I can't do anything but to cry," Zabiullah commented, according to Al-Jazeera. "We always thought our house was safe because of the base," a local resident added, "but now we are shocked. How could this have happened? I can't believe we lost all these young men."

McMaster's visit came just days after the US military dropped its largest nonnuclear bomb, the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB), in the east of the country, ostensibly to target a few hundred ISIS supporters operating in a cave network. The blast killed an estimated 94 ISIS fighters and an unknown number of civilians, with reports of houses being destroyed some three miles away from the blast site.

US politicians and media outlets applauded the strike as a demonstration of US military power and a warning to Russia, China and North Korea as to the methods to which US imperialism is prepared to resort in pursuit of its drive for global hegemony.

The decision to drop the MOAB, together with remarks by various think tanks, point to a deliberate effort by Washington to escalate tensions with Russia and other regional powers over Afghanistan.

Stratfor, which has close links with the US intelligence apparatus, described the Central Asian country in an April 20 analysis as "an increasingly important theater for the US-Russia competition." It complained that Moscow was working to deploy additional troops in Tajikistan on the Afghan border as part of a military cooperation agreement with the Central Asian country.

US and Afghan officials have also made provocative allegations that Russia is aiding the Taliban, claims the Kremlin has dismissed as "fabrications."

On April 14, Moscow held peace talks with the Afghan government and other regional powers. While an invitation was extended to Washington, the Trump administration refused to attend and instead dropped the MOAB a day prior to the meeting.

During his Afghan trip, McMaster also took a swipe at Pakistan, suggesting that the Trump administration was no longer willing to tolerate Islamabad's refusal to confront Taliban fighters based in the border regions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. "We have hoped that Pakistani leaders will understand that it is in their interest to go after these groups less selectively than they have in the past," he said, before traveling to Pakistan, where he delivered a similar message. "The best way to pursue their interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere is through the use of diplomacy and not through the use of proxies that engage in violence."

The escalation of the Afghanistan conflict by the Trump administration will intensify the already horrific conditions faced by the country's long-suffering population after more than fifteen years of war. Hundreds of thousands have lost their lives as a result of US imperialist aggression and millions more have been forced to flee their homes. Civilian deaths reached a record high in 2016, when close to 11,500 noncombatants were killed or wounded. According to the United Nations, one third of these casualties were children.



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