

Pentagon halts release of information on Afghanistan war

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The Pentagon has suddenly ordered the withholding of key information on the state of Afghanistan's security forces that have been published in quarterly reports for nearly a decade. The censoring of the data comes as the Trump administration has given the military brass free rein to escalate US imperialism's longest war, now in its 17th year, sending thousands more troops to the South Asian country, while substantially increasing military spending.

The latest report issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that the US military command in Afghanistan had classified "important measures of ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] performance, such as casualties, personnel strength, attrition, and operational readiness of equipment."

SIGAR was created by Congress in 2008 as an oversight body to monitor the vast US spending on Afghan "reconstruction," now totaling over \$120 billion, with the lion's shares going to the country's security forces. It also has law enforcement powers to investigate the rampant corruption and outright theft that has funneled billions of dollars of this spending into the pockets of military contractors.

The US military command has claimed that it is withholding the information on the state of the Afghan security forces at the request of officials within the American puppet regime of President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, the inspector general, John Sopko, sharply questioned both the motives and the pretext for the US military's censoring of the information.

"The Afghans know what's going on; the Taliban knows what's going on; the US military knows what's going on," he said. "The only people who don't know what's going on are the people paying for it."

He added: "The government usually doesn't classify good news. I don't want any nameless, faceless Afghan bureaucrat telling the American taxpayer what they ought to know."

The day after the issuing of the censored report saw another suicide bombing in the heart of the Afghan capital's most heavily secured district, killing five people and wounding at least 20. The blast took place within about 500 yards of the US Embassy and near other diplomatic compounds and offices of international agencies. It is the latest in a series of such blasts that have killed at least 70 people in Kabul over the past month, underscoring the Ghani government's tenuous hold even over the capital. Last May, a massive truck bomb in the diplomatic district killed 80 people and wounded hundreds.

The only other time the US military has classified such data was in 2015 when the Obama administration was orchestrating the formal handing over of security to the Afghan security forces, and then the data was kept secret for only a few days.

The key reason for censoring the information can be found in the last uncensored report, which pointed to unsustainable losses suffered by the Afghan forces in the first four months of the year, with 2,531 troops and police killed and another 4,238 wounded. This points to an increase in the already punishing toll recorded for all of last year: 6,700 dead and 12,000 wounded.

Casualties, desertions and other sources of attrition have led to a drop of 4,000 in the total number of Afghan troops and 5,000 in that of police. Of course, the overall losses are far greater, given the continuous recruitment of impoverished youth as cannon fodder in the US-led war.

The reliability of the figures provided by the Afghan military on the strength of its forces are, in any case, suspect. It has been estimated that up to 17 percent of the Afghan National Army's official troop total could be

made up of so-called “ghost soldiers,” names of soldiers who are no longer serving, but kept on the rolls so that senior officers can collect their paychecks.

Further underscoring the crisis within the US-backed forces were the latest report’s figures indicating a “sharp increase” in so-called “insider attacks” involving attacks on the Afghan security forces and their US “advisors” by Afghan soldiers and police: “From January 1 to August 15, 2017, there have been 54 reported insider attacks: 48 green-on-green and six ‘green-on-blue’ attacks, when ANDSF personnel turned against their Coalition counterparts. This is an increase of 22 green-on-green and four green-on-blue attacks from last quarter.”

Other figures that were included in the report also point to a steadily deteriorating situation for the US-backed regime and the American occupation. Afghan forces were said to be in control of just 56.8 percent of the country’s 407 districts—the lowest share since SIGAR began keeping figures—having lost control of an additional nine districts to the Taliban over the last six months. Moreover, government controlled areas included just 63.7 percent of the Afghan population, far below the 80 percent which the senior US commander on the ground, Gen. John Nicholson, promised to Congress in February.

The report issued Tuesday also found that the number of civilian casualties inflicted by the US military and the security forces of the Afghan regime had increased by 52 percent this year, attributable in large measure to the escalation of US air strikes, with 2,400 conducted between January and September and more bombs and missiles dropped on the country than at any time since 2012, during the Obama administration’s “surge.” At least two-thirds of those killed and maimed by the US and its puppet forces are women and children, according to the report.

The day before the issuance of the censored SIGAR report, US think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies posted an analysis by Anthony Cordesman, a longtime advisor of the Pentagon, that indicated increasing pessimism within the US military and intelligence apparatus over the Afghanistan intervention.

Cordesman painted a picture of an Afghan military consisting of poverty-stricken youth forced into the army because of lack of work in a country that “has become an economic nightmare for all too many of its citizens.”

“Much of the better paid service sector in the Afghan economy collapsed with the departure of US and other foreign troops in 2012-2014,” Cordesman writes, with “all too many of the better educated and more skilled

Afghans” leaving the country.

His report cites World Bank figures estimating an overall poverty rate of 39.1 percent, climbing to 46 percent in the rural areas. The bank estimates Afghan per capita GDP at just \$590, making it the poorest country on earth outside of sub-Saharan Africa.

An unemployment rate estimated at between 30 and 40 percent for military age males “pushes men—especially young and inexperienced men—into the military out of sheer economic survival and without regard for patriotism or the nature of the cause,” Cordesman writes.

He describes Afghanistan as “one of the worst and most corrupt political structures and governments in the world,” lacking any “coherent political leadership” and characterized by “warlords and power brokers, and a steadily increasing dependence on a narco-economy.”

The situation, he adds, has “ominous historical precedents” that ended in the defeat of “what appeared to be a superior army.” He cites similar levels of corruption and demoralization leading to the defeat of the South Vietnamese army in 1975, the collapse of Chiang Kai-shek’s Chinese Nationalist Army in 1949 and the disintegration of Fulgencio Batista’s security forces in the face of the 1959 Cuban revolution.

In other words, US imperialism is confronting another historic debacle in its 16-year-old war in Afghanistan. Its only answer is to give the military free rein to escalate the bloodshed, increasing the number of air strikes and sending in more troops, while organizing CIA “hunt and kill” militias and drone strikes. At the same time, it is seeking to draw India into a conflict that could rapidly escalate into a broader war involving a confrontation with South Asia’s other nuclear power, Pakistan.

The suppression and censorship of information is an integral part of this escalation of a war that enjoys no significant support by the American people.



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