

Afghan deaths, troop casualties soar in first days of new US offensive

By James Cogan
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The first days of the offensive by US marines into the southern province of Helmand make clear it will result in a massive escalation in violence against the Afghan people and an upsurge in resistance to the US and NATO occupation across the country.

Since Thursday, marine units have moved from their base near the Helmand provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, down the Helmand River Valley as far as the town of Bahram Chah, 200 kilometres to the south on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. They have occupied the major towns of Nawa, Garmser and Khan Neshin. British troops, operating to the north of Lashkar Gah, have deployed to secure the road between the city and the town of Gereshk.

The US tactics are modeled on the Iraq surge and are aimed at embedding troops among civilians. Forward bases are being established in numerous small villages and hamlets that have never seen occupation forces or representatives of the Afghan puppet government headed by President Hamid Karzai. The population is being ordered to attend meetings or *shuras*, where marine officers dictate how they will live.

Southern Helmand has been chosen for the first major offensive in Afghanistan under the Obama administration because it is in a state of revolt against the occupation and Karzai's regime. Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, next to nothing has been done to alleviate poverty, repair damaged agricultural infrastructure or provide essential services. Entire communities endure malnutrition and are forced to rely on the opium trade to generate income. Moreover, the local ethnic Pashtun population has historically been deeply hostile to any form of foreign domination. The anti-occupation resistance led by Taliban loyalists has considerable popular support.

The marines will seek to crush the insurgency with

daily repression—curfews, roadblocks, searches, identity checks and arbitrary detentions. The recently appointed commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, was one of the principal directors of counter-insurgency missions in Iraq. The unit he headed, the Joint Special Operations Command, carried out a systematic policy of targeted assassinations of suspected resistance fighters, and the same brutal methods will now be applied in the rebellious areas of southern Afghanistan.

The offensive has been marked by a scarcity of information about the US operations and their impact on the population. With the complicity of the media, people in America and around the world are being kept in the dark about what exactly the Obama administration is carrying out in the name of “democracy” and “security”. What *is* known is that scores of Afghan men were killed on Thursday and Friday when they attempted to resist the entry of marines into an area near Garmser. Fighting has also taken place around Khan Neshin.

The few reports that have come out of the newly-occupied areas point to pervasive local opposition toward US troops. In some villages, locals have boycotted the *shuras*. At a meeting in the village of Sorkhdoz, a Reuters journalist reported that the local leader bluntly told American officers “I do not trust you”, and warned that the villagers would take up arms if the occupation forces did not deliver a promised school and health clinic.

To date, US casualties in the Helmand offensive are still reported as one dead and a dozen or so wounded. In the main, the Afghan insurgents appear to be avoiding direct battles with the far better equipped American troops. A Taliban spokesman told Agence France Presse: “We are not trying to engage with them

too soon because there are a lot of them and they would use air force in which case there would be a lot of civilian casualties.... Our men are among the people.”

The insurgents will rely on guerilla tactics. Over the weekend, three British troops were killed by roadside bombs and a rocket-propelled grenade attack in the province, and a supply convoy for NATO troops was ambushed. One mercenary security contractor was killed and four wounded.

There has been an upsurge in attacks on US and NATO troops in other areas of the country since the offensive began. Monday was the costliest day for the American military in Afghanistan in close to a year. Two American troops were killed by a roadside bomb in the southern province of Zabul, while four others were killed by a roadside bombing in the province of Kunduz, not far from the capital Kabul, and another in an engagement in the eastern province of Paktika.

The Taliban appears to be conducting an offensive in Paktika. On Saturday, insurgents launched a rare assault on a small US base in the remote district of Zerok, where fighting reportedly lasted for several hours. It only ended after air strikes and helicopter gunships were called in, killing as many as 45 insurgents. Two American troops were killed and seven wounded. The Zerok base is reportedly the same one from which, according to the Taliban, a “drunken” American soldier walked off on June 30, without his equipment or weapons, and was taken prisoner by the insurgents.

Overall, at least 18 NATO troops have been killed in the first week of July. In all likelihood, 2009 will see the highest rate of deaths in the war. So far this year, 174 soldiers have lost their lives, compared with 294 in all 2008 and 232 in 2007. Hundreds of Afghan government troops and police have also been killed.

Figures within the US military are questioning whether Obama’s increase of US troop numbers in Afghanistan to 68,000 by the end of the year will be enough in the face of an entrenched anti-occupation insurgency. Even with the reinforcements and the NATO contingents, the total occupation force is barely 100,000. The surge in Iraq, by contrast, ultimately involved close to 200,000 American, British and other western troops.

Public opinion is already being conditioned for a further escalation of the Afghan war. *Washington Post*

journalist Bob Woodward reported last week that the view of one unnamed senior US officer was that at least 100,000 American troops were needed—i.e., around 30,000 more.

General McChrystal is scheduled to report to the administration and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a matter of weeks regarding troop numbers. If his request is to increase them, Obama will bend over backwards to meet it. The dispatch of more and more troops follows inexorably from the determination in the White House to consolidate Afghanistan as a neo-colonial client state in Central Asia.

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