

Afghanistan: Another massacre as a bloody summer looms in Kandahar

By James Cogan
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A car carrying an Afghan police officer and three teenagers was blasted with machine gun fire by NATO troops on Monday, allegedly because it came “too close” to a convoy traveling along a highway in the eastern province of Khost. All four occupants were killed.

Once again, the US-NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) occupying Afghanistan made the false claim that two of the passengers were “known insurgents” and the others their “associates.” After protests by the local Khost authorities and Afghan president Hamid Karzai, the ISAF admitted that all four were civilians and that no weapons had been found in the vehicle. According to the father of two of the boys who were killed, the teenagers were returning from a volleyball game.

The latest killing of Afghan civilians follows the massacre of 5 people and wounding of at least 18 others in Kandahar province on April 12, when American troops opened fire on a bus that also was allegedly “too close” to their convoy. It comes in the wake of confirmation that US special forces dug their bullets out of the bodies of three women—two of them pregnant—to try to cover up the fact they had killed them during a botched nighttime raid on a compound in Paktia province on February 12. Until its lies were exposed, the ISAF claimed that the women had been murdered by the Taliban before the raid. Two men, a local police commander and his brother, were also killed.

The regular killing of civilians has dramatically heightened the already pervasive hatred of the Afghan population for the occupation forces, even as a steady build-up takes place of US and NATO troops in the country. There are now close to 130,000 deployed, with a further 20,000—predominantly American—scheduled to arrive by the end of July as part of President Obama’s “surge” of forces in Central Asia.

The centerpiece of the “surge” will be an offensive in the city of Kandahar and its surrounding regions, an area that was the stronghold of the Taliban Islamist government from 1996 to 2001, before it was overthrown and driven underground by the US invasion. Along with the

neighboring province of Helmand, Kandahar has been the focus of Taliban resistance to the occupation.

Last week, with considerable media fanfare, US troops abandoned their positions in the remote Korengal Valley in eastern Afghanistan, where they were seeking to block the flow of Afghan insurgents and equipment back and forth from Pakistan’s tribal border region. Since American troops moved into the valley in 2005, 40 soldiers and marines have been killed and hundreds wounded in some of the bloodiest battles of the nine-year war.

The withdrawal from positions such as Korengal is part of US-NATO commander General Stanley McChrystal’s plan to use the bulk of the troops at his disposal to secure the major urban centers like Kandahar, and to rely on air strikes and special forces operations to suppress Taliban activity in the vast rural hinterland of Afghanistan. After years of failing to subdue resistance, the Soviet occupation army in the 1980s ultimately turned to a similar strategy of holding the urban centers, before it was forced to leave the country in defeat in 1988.

Considerable hopes are being invested by the US military in its plan to drive the Taliban out of Kandahar city. A US official told the *Christian Science Monitor* this month: “This is the jewel. If the Taliban lose effective control of the city—their ability to harass, intimidate and control the outcomes of what happens on the normal days of life in Kandahar—they’ve lost.” In March, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen declared, “Kandahar is the very heart of the insurgency. It is a cornerstone in reversing the momentum for the Taliban.”

A force of at least 12,000 US, British and Canadian troops, supported by more than 10,000 Afghan government soldiers and police, is being assembled for the operation, which is set to continue for at least eight weeks until the Ramadan Islamic festival in August. Thousands of other troops will be used to attempt to block off possible routes for the reinforcement, resupply or retreat of Taliban fighters in the city.

The offensive in Kandahar is slated to begin in June—the

first month of summer when both weather and road conditions are more favorable for military operations for both sides. The expectation among US and NATO commanders is that their casualties will increase dramatically due to the broad popular support enjoyed by the Taliban-led resistance in the area.

A survey in the province commissioned by McChrystal and carried out by a private contractor, Glevum Associates, found that 94 percent of people supported a peace conference with the Taliban and 85 percent viewed the Islamist fighters as “our Afghan brothers.” The ISAF and the puppet Afghan Army and police were considered the greatest threat to personal security by 56 percent of people. Just 36 percent named the Taliban and the roadside bombs that guerillas regularly use to attack foreign and government forces as the greatest risk.

More than two thirds of those surveyed stated that they viewed the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai as totally corrupt. The pro-occupation strongman in Kandahar province is Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of the president. US military reports have alleged that he has intimate ties to local drug barons. The *New York Times* reported in October 2009 that he also receives payments from the CIA. He is further accused of acquiring land and construction projects through corruption. In sharp contrast to their attitude toward the US-backed figures like the Karzais, some 53 percent of people stated that they consider the Taliban to be honest and “incorruptible.”

The survey of some 1,994 people was only carried out in areas under the control of the occupation forces, so its results are most likely an understatement of the opposition to US-NATO forces. A summary of the findings was first made public on April 16 by *Wired.com*'s Danger Room.

This week, the Associated Press published an interview with a local Kandahar Taliban commander named Mubeen, who claimed that the resistance had used the winter months to move additional fighters, explosives and other hardware into Kandahar in anticipation of the offensive. Kandahar itself is a crowded city of as many as 800,000 people, with narrow roads and labyrinthine streets that lend themselves to urban guerrilla warfare. With the assistance of locals, the Taliban claims to have been rigging bombs and other traps for the occupation forces.

Mubeen told the AP, “Because of the American attitude to the people, they are sympathetic to us. Every day we are getting more support. We are not strangers. We are not foreigners. We are from the people.” If the occupation forces proved too strong, he said, “we will just leave and come back after.” The region surrounding Kandahar city has a rural population of some 500,000, among whom fighters have sheltered since 2001.

Attacks against occupation targets in Kandahar are already beginning to increase. On Thursday, Taliban militants assassinated the government's director of agriculture in the province while he shopped in a Kandahar suburb. On Monday, the pro-US deputy mayor of the city was shot dead as he bowed to pray in a mosque. Explosives rigged to a donkey were detonated outside a police station the same day. The week before, housing associated with contracting companies working for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Afghan government was bombed, killing 3 locals and wounding as many as 10 foreign workers. It was the fifth attack on USAID-linked facilities in Kandahar and Helmand in a month.

As of April 22, 166 US and NATO troops had already been killed this year in Afghanistan—nearly double the number during the same period in 2009. In every previous year, the bulk of US-NATO deaths and injuries have been suffered between July and October. If, as is likely, casualties soar to well over 100 per month due to heavy fighting in Kandahar, it is possible that the overall annual death toll could reach the 1,000 mark this year for the first time during the war.

Since 2001, the lives of 1,733 US and NATO troops have so far been squandered in Afghanistan to realize the US's predatory ambition to dominate the oil-rich and strategic region of Central Asia. At least another 8,000 have been wounded-in-action, including more than 5,000 Americans. Thousands more have suffered non-battle injuries and illness.

While there is no accurate count of Afghan casualties over the past eight and a half years, it certainly runs in the tens of thousands. Obama's surge will only to add to the toll of death and suffering.

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