

Karzai calls for reducing US military operations in Afghanistan

By Bill Van Auken
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In an interview published by the *Washington Post* Sunday, President Hamid Karzai called for reducing the number of US troops deployed in Afghanistan and calling a halt to aggressive operations that are claiming a growing number of civilian lives.

The statements by the Afghan president coincided with a sharp spike in violence, with five NATO troops killed on Sunday and a series of attacks staged by armed anti-occupation forces across the country over the weekend.

Karzai's remarks underscored the increasingly fractious relationship between the Obama administration and the Afghan president, who was installed as Washington's stooge by the US intervention that began more than nine years ago.

The call for cutting back on combat operations and reducing the US military's footprint in Afghanistan comes just as the Pentagon is launching its major offensive in Kandahar province, a stronghold of the Taliban, and only months after the arrival of the last of the 30,000 additional troops ordered into the country under the surge announced by President Barack Obama last December.

"I think 10 years is a long time to continue to have military operations," Karzai told the *Post*. "The time has come to reduce military operations. The time has come to reduce the presence of, you know, boots in Afghanistan...to reduce the intrusiveness into the daily Afghan life.... Make it more civilian."

He continued that it was "not desirable for the Afghan people either to have 100,000 or more foreign troops going around the country endlessly" and declared the US deployment unsustainable and an "unnecessary burden" on US taxpayers.

Karzai said that the Afghan people wanted their "countryside, villages, homes, towns, not to be so overwhelmed with the military presence," suggesting that US troops should be confined to their bases and employed only in combating cross-border incursions from Pakistan.

In particular, he denounced the escalating number of night raids carried out by US special operations troops seeking to

kill or capture members of the Taliban and others suspected of fighting against the occupation.

"The raiding homes at night. Terrible. Terrible," said the Afghan president. "A serious cause of the Afghan people's disenchantment with NATO and with the Afghan government. Bursting into homes at night, arresting Afghans, this isn't the business of any foreign troops."

He likewise condemned "the violence and the violation of our laws" by private security contractors, which, together with civilian contractors, he charged, have contributed to the creation of a "parallel government" in Afghanistan.

Karzai dismissed US and NATO claims that the war in Afghanistan is being waged to counter the threat of terrorism. "In my opinion and in the opinion of the absolute majority of the Afghan people, the war on terror cannot be conducted in Afghanistan because that isn't here. It is somewhere else," he said. "We are only reaping the consequences of it here."

The Afghan president reiterated, "I would like to have an end sooner rather than later to these nighttime raids in Afghan homes, no matter how effective they are in the sense of the military in the United States or in NATO, no matter how happy they may be about it in America or in NATO." He added, "How can you measure the consequences of it in terms of the loss of life of children and women because you have captured" a single member of the Taliban. "Is he so important to have 10 more people killed, civilians? Who determines that?"

Karzai also hit back at Washington's criticism of corruption within his regime, blaming US contracts and funding pouring into the country that is out of his government's control and, which he said, is often funneled to children and relatives of leading Afghan officials.

Karzai's statements came in advance of a NATO summit to be held in Lisbon at the end of this week to consider strategy in Afghanistan. They cut directly across a concerted campaign being waged by US officials to disabuse the public of any illusions that the Obama administration intends to carry through with the pledge made by the US

president last December to begin withdrawing American troops from the country in July of next year.

Instead, US, European and Canadian officials are all now speaking in terms of a “transition” of the US-led occupation force’s control of the country to NATO-trained Afghan security forces at the end of 2014, with troop levels to remain high and combat operations continuing until then and beyond.

The *Washington Post* reported Saturday that the Lisbon summit will announce a “ ‘transition’ process, which will not immediately include troop withdrawals, NATO will also state its intention to keep combat troops in Afghanistan until 2014.”

The *Post* also reported an “ ‘enduring partnership’ agreement being negotiated between NATO and Afghanistan [that] will extend security support indefinitely.” The pact, the paper said, will be completed by January.

Gen. David Petraeus, the senior US commander in Afghanistan, is expected to report to the Lisbon summit that the 30,000-troop surge has already begun to effect a major shift in Afghanistan, with the occupation gaining the momentum against the Taliban and other resistance forces.

The US general has based himself on a body count developed by the Pentagon for alleged leaders and supporters of the insurgency killed in the special operations raids that Karzai is demanding be brought to a halt.

According to figures provided by the Pentagon to CNN late last month, special operations forces had killed 339 “insurgent leaders” and 983 “rank-and-file insurgents,” while capturing nearly 2,500 more alleged fighters during more than 3,400 operations carried out over a 90-day period ending October 21. As Karzai’s statements suggest, these operations have been accompanied by the deaths of large numbers of civilians.

According to the *Post*, US intelligence agencies have questioned Petraeus’s claims of success based upon these death squad operations. “While agreeing that US forces have killed large numbers of mid-level Taliban, they see no real change in insurgent capabilities, with commanders and fighters being quickly replaced.”

The intelligence agencies, according to the article, “have said the military is trying to justify its ongoing mission and limit the promised withdrawals.” The *Post* quoted one official as saying that the US intelligence apparatus “thinks Petraeus is full of it,” but that “no one argues with Petraeus in front of the president.”

US and NATO officials expressed displeasure with Karzai’s remarks, while indicating that the Pentagon’s military strategy in Afghanistan will not be swayed by the opinions of a president that Washington treats as a puppet.

“We understand President Karzai’s concerns, but we

would not be as far along as we are pressuring the network had it not been for these very precision operations we do at night,” a NATO military official told the *Post*. “I don’t see any near-term alternative to this kind of operation.”

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee who was part of a congressional delegation that met with Karzai last week, described himself as “just stunned” by the Afghan president’s remarks.

Speaking to the AFP news agency, Graham said that during their discussions, Karzai made no mention of night raids or differences with Petraeus over US military operations in Afghanistan. He added that the discussions included “looking long term with Afghanistan about having two air bases in a permanent fashion in Afghanistan to provide stability.”

Graham brushed aside the Afghan president’s position, telling AFP: “The Petraeus strategy must be allowed to go forward for us to be successful. The security gains are obvious. We’re not there yet, but we’re moving in the right direction.”

The US offensive in Afghanistan has been marked by a surge of violent clashes. Occupation officials reported that five NATO troops died on Sunday, the worst death toll in over a month. Three of them were killed in clashes with resistance fighters in the eastern part of the country, while two more died in explosions in the south. Three NATO soldiers were reported killed on Saturday.

The year 2010 is already by far the deadliest for the occupation since the US invaded Afghanistan more than nine years ago. A total of 639 US and other occupation troops have been killed thus far this year, compared to 521 for all of 2009.

NATO officials acknowledged that US troops fighting in the Zhari district of Kandahar province Sunday unleashed an artillery barrage that killed one child and left another seriously wounded.

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