

After latest massacre, NATO to continue attacks on Afghan civilians

By Bill Van Auken
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The NATO command in Afghanistan Tuesday brushed aside President Hamid Karzai's demand for a halt to air strikes and night raids on Afghan homes.

Karzai issued the demand in the face of mass popular outrage over a US air strike that killed 14 civilians—10 of them children and two of them women—in the southern Afghan province of Helmand on the night of May 28. It was only the latest in a series of atrocities carried out by American forces that have resulted in mass civilian casualties.

Speaking at a news conference in Kabul, the Afghan president declared, "From this moment, air strikes on the houses of people are not allowed."

Karzai continued by warning: "If after the Afghan government said the aerial bombing of Afghan houses is banned and if it continues, then their presence will change from a war against terrorism to an occupying force. And in that case, Afghan history is witness to how the Afghans deal with occupying forces."

The statement was a clear invocation of the CIA-backed war by the Afghan mujahideen which ended in the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the country in 1989. It also represented a tacit legitimization of the actions being carried out by armed Afghan opposition groups opposed to the current US-led occupation.

Earlier, Karzai had participated in a televised videoconference with the father of several of the children killed in the air strike and a tribal leader from the Nawzad district of Helmand where it took place. The president described himself as depressed by the images of villagers carrying dead children dug from the rubble of demolished homes and vowed that he was issuing a final warning that such attacks must cease.

As the *New York Times* reported: "Images of grieving friends and relatives carrying the bruised and bloodied bodies of dead children were broadcast on television the morning after the attack, inflaming passions."

It is to these "passions" that Karzai is responding, seeking to disassociate his government from the military actions of US and other foreign troops, which are opposed by the overwhelming majority of the Afghan population.

Last weekend's deadly air strike comes on the heels of a special forces night raid in northern Takhar province that claimed the lives of four civilians earlier last month. That action sparked mass protests that ended in the deaths of at least a dozen demonstrators.

US and NATO officials treated Karzai's warnings and demands with barely concealed contempt.

"In order to achieve our goals, we should continue with nighttime raids," ISAF spokesman Brig. Gen. Josef Blotz said at a Kabul press conference. ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) is the official name of the UN-mandated occupation force. "We respect Karzai's demand for a stop to ISAF operations, but the nighttime raids should continue to achieve our goals," Blotz added.

Similarly, Oana Lungescu, a NATO spokesman in Brussels, said air strikes would be coordinated with Afghan forces, but "they continue to be necessary."

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that officials in Kabul had "played down" the significance of Karzai's remarks. "Our relations with the government of Afghanistan are good," it quoted one military official as saying.

The incident only underscores that Washington regards the Karzai government as its puppet, installed by US force of arms in 2001 and maintained in power thanks to the presence in the country of over 140,000 foreign troops, nearly 100,000 of them American.

While there may be some concern about maintaining the fiction that the US-led force is in Afghanistan at the invitation of a legitimate government, this is entirely secondary to the Pentagon's determination to pursue a military strategy aimed at crushing resistance and establishing US control over the embattled country.

Citing the instructions of the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, who is the ostensible author of the Pentagon's counterinsurgency strategy, another ISAF spokesman, Rear Adm. Vic Beck, said in a statement Tuesday that the US military shared Karzai's concerns. "General Petraeus has repeatedly noted that every liberation force has to be very conscious that it can, over time, become seen as an occupation force," he said.

The American-led "liberation force" has killed tens of thousands of Afghan civilians and turned hundreds of thousands more into refugees. The storming of houses in the middle of the night by heavily armed troops and the killing of children from the air as they sleep has convinced a growing majority of the population that the US presence has nothing to do with "liberation."

A poll produced last month by the International Council on Security and Development found that 87 percent of Afghans in the south of the country, where US forces are concentrated, believe that US-NATO military operations are bad for the country. In the

north of the country, where there are substantially fewer operations, the majority holding the same opinion still reaches 76 percent.

The same poll found that 69 percent of the people in the south of the country believe that US-NATO forces are responsible for the bulk of civilian casualties, while only 10 percent believe that the Taliban are responsible for killing more civilians than the foreign occupation troops.

This view stands in stark contrast to a United Nations report that found that 2,777 civilians were killed in Afghanistan in 2010, a 15 percent increase over the previous year, while blaming the Taliban for the majority of the deaths. Critics of the report have charged that the UN significantly underestimated the number of civilians killed in US air strikes and special forces night raids, in part by uncritically accepting the routine US-NATO claims that all those killed in these actions are “insurgents.”

Since replacing Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who was sacked as the senior US commander in Afghanistan nearly a year ago, Petraeus has ordered a doubling of air strikes, which McChrystal had curtailed out of concern that civilian casualties would only fuel the armed resistance. Special forces night raids have also increased sharply.

The latest verbal clash between Karzai and the US occupation authorities comes just weeks before the deadline set by the Obama administration for beginning a drawdown of US troops. Obama pledged a year and a half ago, when he announced his “surge” of an additional 30,000 troops into the country, that he would begin a withdrawal in July 2011.

Since then, the administration has sought to diminish the significance of the deadline, stressing instead a 2014 target date for turning over the counterinsurgency campaign to Afghan puppet forces.

After nearly a decade of US war and occupation, however, there is no indication that the Afghan government or the Afghan National Army and police forces are prepared to take over.

The US strategy for the “Afghanization” of the war has been dealt a number of blows recently with the spread of devastating strikes by the Afghan resistance to areas that had previously been considered stable and ready for Afghan forces to assume control.

The latest of these attacks took place Monday when armed fighters attempted to storm the main NATO base in the western city of Herat, one of the first areas also slated for a turnover to Afghan forces. The fighting claimed the lives of several Afghans and left five Italian troops and some 37 Afghans wounded.

The attack follows the bombing last weekend of the governor’s compound in the northern province of Takhar during a high-level security meeting. The blast killed the region’s senior Afghan police official and wounded the German general in command of all NATO forces in the north of the country.

In the face of the deteriorating security situation, there were several high-level calls for “staying the course” and avoiding any significant drawdown of troops when the July 2011 deadline arrives.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO’s secretary general, argued against reducing US-NATO forces during a speech in Bulgaria. “It is of utmost importance that we stay the course, that we stay as

long as it takes to finish our job,” he said.

Rasmussen expanded on this theme in an interview with the *Financial Times*, arguing against proposals to transform the US-NATO mission from a counterinsurgency to a counter-terrorism operation, involving far fewer troops.

“We don’t want to leave a security vacuum in the country after we have gone,” he told the newspaper. “We must maintain the broad counterinsurgency strategy to fulfill that, and I feel sure the US will stick to that policy.”

Meanwhile, the British military’s senior general made the same appeal in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*. Gen. James Bucknall insisted that the troops that Obama ordered into Afghanistan as part of his “surge” must remain in the country for at least two more summers in order to solidify supposed security gains.

“This is not the time to send conflicting signals on commitment to the campaign,” said Bucknall.

Citing unnamed British officials, the *Telegraph* reported that the decision of British Prime Minister David Cameron to order the withdrawal of 450 British troops as part of its cutbacks in military spending had turned into “a test of civilian authority over the military.” It quoted Bucknall as saying that the British high command was dealing with the order by withdrawing “cooks, engineers and other support personnel,” while maintaining the number of combat troops unchanged.

Sections of Congressional Democrats, as well as some Republicans, have called for a significant drawdown of US troops on the grounds that the mounting deficit and across-the-board cuts in federal spending make the cost of the war—expected to reach at least \$113 billion for the current fiscal year—unsustainable.

However, Obama has shown no inclination to challenge the prevailing view within the US military command, which is in sync with that of Rasmussen and General Bucknall, that US imperialism must “stay the course” in its decade-old campaign to conquer Afghanistan and assert US hegemony in the strategically critical and oil-rich region of Central Asia.

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