

US, UK vow no change in war after Afghanistan massacre

By Bill Van Auken
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US President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron used a joint White House press conference Wednesday to stress that there will be no shift in Afghanistan war strategy in the wake of last weekend's savage massacre of 16 civilians in Kandahar province.

The killings have been attributed to a lone 38-year-old Army staff sergeant, who left his base and went door-to-door shooting Afghans, most of them women and children, as they slept in their beds.

There will be no "sudden, immediate changes to the plan we already have," declared Obama. He said that at a NATO summit set to take place in Chicago in May, final plans will be laid for a "transition" that is supposedly going to shift US and other foreign troops to a "support role" next year and give Afghan military and police "full responsibility for security" by the end of 2014.

"In terms of pace, I don't anticipate at this stage that we're going to be making any sudden additional changes to the plan that we currently have," Obama said, claiming that the decade-old US-led war had yielded "progress."

In his remarks, Cameron echoed Obama's rejection of any accelerated withdrawal, while also claiming that the occupation had yielded "tangible progress."

Under the plan adopted by the Obama administration, some 23,000 US troops are to be withdrawn by September of this year, bringing the total number still deployed in Afghanistan to 68,000—the same troop level that existed before Obama ordered a "surge" in the war in December 2009.

There has, however, been no indication of how many troops will be pulled out and when, between this fall and the end of 2014. US military commanders, who are preparing a new military offensive in eastern

Afghanistan, near the Pakistan border, are opposing further deadlines for reductions in troop deployments.

Obama was forced to acknowledge polls indicating that substantial majorities in both the US and Britain oppose the continuation of the war and do not believe that it is worth fighting. A poll conducted March 12-13 by Reuters/Ipsos found that 61 percent of Americans support the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. "It's because we've been there for 10 years, and people get weary, and they know friends and neighbors who have lost loved ones as a consequence of war," the president said, while insisting that Washington would "achieve our objectives in 2014."

Washington's main objective is to secure permanent US bases and a permanent US military presence in Afghanistan under the guise of training and advising Afghan security forces and carrying out "counter-terror" operations. Ongoing negotiations on a "security partnership" agreement have been disrupted by a series of incidents that have stoked popular hostility to the foreign military presence, from the release of a video of US Marines urinating on the corpses of slain Afghans, to the burning of copies of the Koran at the US airbase in Bagram last month to the latest slaughter in Kandahar province.

The talk of "progress" in Washington was belied by the growing wave of anger within the Afghan population over the latest killings, which follows a long series of war crimes, mass civilian casualties and humiliation of the Afghan people at the hands of the US-NATO occupation.

In Jalalabad on Tuesday, thousands of students took to the streets shouting "Death to America" and "Death to Obama." The protesters, who blocked the main highway from Jalalabad to Kabul, carried banners denouncing foreign occupation and called for the

soldier charged with last Sunday's killings to be publicly tried in Afghanistan.

Also on Tuesday, the Afghan Senate walked out of its regular session in protest over the Kandahar massacre, the Peshawar-based Afghan Islamic Press news agency reported. Legislators had begun the session by chanting angry slogans against the occupation.

Fazel Hadi Moslemyar, the Senate's speaker, told reporters: "We do not need foreign forces in Afghanistan. All the problems which we are facing are created by them. If they leave, the neighboring countries will leave us alone and we can settle our country's problems on our own."

Like the students, the Afghan legislators demanded that the American soldier charged in the killings be tried publicly by an Afghan court.

A Pentagon official revealed Wednesday afternoon, however, that the soldier had been placed on a military aircraft and flown out of the country to a "pretrial confinement facility." This action is likely to fuel a new upsurge of mass opposition to the occupation.

Meanwhile, an Afghan whose eight children, ages 2 through 12, wife, brother and sister-in-law were shot and burned in the massacre last Sunday morning told the *Times* of London that he would join the Taliban and fight the occupation forces if the soldier accused in the killings is not punished.

Mohammed Wazir Agha, 35, said he wanted the soldier tried in an Afghan court. "I want the same thing done to him that he did. He should burn in the fire like they did. Like my children did. What is the sin of my children?"

Wazir recounted that in the immediate aftermath of the massacre, a crowd of over a thousand infuriated Afghans had come together in the village with the intention of storming the nearby US military camp, but were dissuaded by village elders.

"I want the Americans out of Afghanistan now," he added. "They have built nothing but just destroyed houses and martyred people."

While US military officials have insisted from the outset that the massacre was the work of the lone staff sergeant, who is said to have confessed to the killings, accounts from Afghan villagers continue to implicate two or even more US soldiers in the massacre.

And while American officials from the president on down have portrayed the massacre as an aberration,

that does not represent "who we are as a country," reactions in Afghanistan place the vicious killings in the context of countless special forces night raids, bombings and other operations that have inflicted tens of thousands of civilian casualties.

As the two heads of state met in Washington, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta staged a tense visit to Afghanistan in an attempt to shore up talks with the Karzai regime on a permanent US military presence in the country.

Giving the lie to the claims by Obama and Cameron about improved conditions in Afghanistan, Panetta's visit appeared to be conducted under a state of siege from its outset. As his plane touched down at Camp Bastion in Helmand province, a truck that had been stolen earlier from an Afghan soldier was driven onto the runway, speeding toward the ramp where the defense secretary's plane was headed before it hit a ditch and burst into flames. A NATO soldier was hit by the truck in the incident, which appeared to be an attempted bombing. Pentagon officials tried to put the best face on the events, claiming that Panetta was never in danger as the truck only came within 300 feet of his plane.

Panetta's meeting with US Marines at Helmand also reflected the escalating crisis of the US occupation. Hundreds of Marines who had assembled to hear the defense secretary speak were suddenly given an unprecedented order to leave the tent and take their assault rifles and other weapons outside.

Members of the Afghan puppet security forces are routinely forbidden from carrying weapons during such assemblies. At least 75 US and other NATO troops have been killed by Afghan soldiers and police in the last five years.

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