

# Five Australian soldiers killed in “worst day” in Afghanistan

By Mike Head  
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Five Australian soldiers have been killed within four hours in Afghanistan, the country’s greatest loss of lives on a battlefield in a single day since the Vietnam War.

The deaths are a further blow to the claims of the Labor government, echoing those of the Obama administration, to be making progress in the decade-long occupation of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, while feigning sympathy for the men’s families, Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared there would be no early withdrawal of Australian troops.

Three men died on Wednesday night when an Afghan soldier opened fire at close range with an automatic weapon at Wahib, a forward patrol base just 20 kilometres north of the Uruzgan provincial capital, Tarin Kowt. No names of the victims have yet been released. They were a 40-year-old Lance Corporal, a 23-year-old private and a 21-year-old sapper. Two other soldiers were wounded, one seriously.

A manhunt is underway for the assailant, but he is reported to have escaped with the assistance of a local Taliban commander. A Taliban statement claimed responsibility for the attack, the latest in an escalating wave of “insider” killings of US and allied troops by members of the Afghan army and police forces.

Nineteen Australian soldiers have now been shot by Afghan army members since May last year—seven killed and others badly wounded—in what the US military has dubbed “green-on-blue” attacks.

Early yesterday morning, two Australian SAS members died when a NATO helicopter crashed in Helmand province. One was 30 years old and the other 23. A NATO crewman was wounded. The Australian military claimed there had been no sign of enemy fire, but provided no other explanation. Both Helmand and Uruzgan provinces—southern Pashtun areas—are widely

acknowledged to be largely under the control of anti-occupation insurgents.

The deaths take the Australian toll in Afghanistan to 38 since 2002, with another 240 seriously wounded. The vast majority of the deaths—34—have occurred since the Labor government continued the war, after taking office in November 2007. Of those, 29 have been killed since 2009, when Labor boosted the Australian contingent in line with the Obama administration’s “surge” in Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Gillard said it was the country’s “worst day” in Afghanistan. Such was the potential political damage that she quickly returned home from the Pacific Islands Forum summit in the Cook Islands—a day before US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was due to arrive at the forum.

Gillard conceded that the deaths would deepen the public opposition to the war. “This is news so truly shocking that it will feel for many Australians like a physical blow,” she said.

But the prime minister vowed there would no change to her government’s timetable to keep the bulk of the 1,550 Australian troops in Afghanistan until 2014. An unspecified number will remain indefinitely, on the pretext of continuing to mentor the US-sponsored Afghan security forces. “Our strategy is well defined, our strategy is constant,” Gillard declared.

In reality, the so-called strategy of handing Afghanistan over to local security forces, in order to maintain a puppet regime headed by President Hamid Karzai, lies in tatters. Despite intensive recruitment efforts, which insurgents are evidently exploiting to infiltrate the army and police, the Afghan security forces are reportedly suffering a near 60 percent attrition rate, making it difficult to achieve the target of a 352,000-strong force by this October.

Gillard admitted that “insider” attacks by Afghan forces on international troops were “corrosive of trust” between Australian soldiers and the Afghans that they are meant to be training. So far this year, 45 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops have been killed in such incidents, an increase from 2011 when 35 died in the same manner. The numbers have roughly doubled every year for the past four years.

Adding to the impact of the latest casualties is that they occurred despite extreme security precautions. Two weeks ago, the top US military commander in Afghanistan, General John Allen, directed that US soldiers carry loaded weapons with full magazines of ammunition at all times, even when resting in supposedly secure facilities, such as the huge American compound at Bagram Air Base.

During any time spent with Afghan troops or police, at least one ISAF soldier must be designated as a “guardian angel” to watch the purported allies and shoot first if they seem about to attack ISAF troops. Australian troops must wear body armour at all times, even while taking breaks, and their accommodation has been segregated from that of the Afghan soldiers. Much “training” is now conducted with plastic weapons.

These measures underscore the precariousness of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. The Pentagon claims that Taliban “infiltrators” are responsible for only 11 percent of the “insider” attacks, with the rest involving lone individuals. Even if true, this demonstrates widespread hostility to the military occupation.

Before leaving the Cook Islands, Gillard sought to remind Australians that “this is a war with a purpose and it is a war with an end.” She insisted: “We went for the right reasons in our national interest to prevent Afghanistan from being a safe haven for terrorists who would come and kill Australians and so many innocent civilians.”

The truth is that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 provided a convenient pretext for the Australian government to join Washington in previously-prepared US plans to invade Afghanistan, and later Iraq. The supposed enemies in Afghanistan, the Islamic fundamentalist Al Qaeda and the Taliban, were largely created by the CIA in the 1980s during the US-backed war against the Soviet-supported regime, and Al

Qaeda-linked groups function as proxies of the US in its efforts to oust the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Obama, like George W. Bush before him, later claimed to be freeing the people of Afghanistan from Taliban despotism and promoting democracy. Instead, Washington has imposed Karzai’s notoriously corrupt regime, which rigs elections, carries out torture and engages in systemic repression.

The real purpose of the war has been to secure US hegemony over the energy-rich and strategically vital Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions.

Gillard, like Prime Minister John Howard before her, has kept Australian troops in the frontline in Afghanistan to secure US backing for the Australian corporate elite’s own predatory interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Even as the French and New Zealand governments accelerate their withdrawals from Afghanistan after “insider” attacks, she is maintaining her slavish support for the US alliance, which was a key factor in Washington’s support for her installation as prime minister in mid-2010.

As always, Gillard is taking her cue from the Murdoch media. In today’s *Australian*, foreign editor Greg Sheridan, a vociferous supporter of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, called for an early withdrawal, conceding: “The only remotely military purpose the presence of our soldiers serves is to shore up our alliance with the US.”

But the newspaper’s editorial was adamant: “The mission goal remains clear, and its importance for global security is undiminished by the atrocities inflicted in this brutally ugly conflict. Many people here and in other coalition countries have lost the stomach for this conflict, and the green-on-blue casualties exacerbate a sense of despair. Yet, as the Prime Minister has said, this remains a war with a purpose and an end.”

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