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Death toll in Kabul airport terrorist attack rises to 170, as US military continues evacuations

The official death toll from the terrorist attack outside Kabul international airport on Thursday was increased significantly on Friday to over 160. The number of Afghan victims almost tripled and the US Defense Department confirmed the death of one additional service member, bringing the total of American military fatalities to 13.



Wounded Afghans lie on a bed at a hospital after a deadly explosions outside the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 26, 2021. (AP Photo/Mohammad Asif Khan)

At a Defense Department press briefing Friday morning, Major General Hank Taylor stated that only one suicide bomber was involved in the assault. Originally, reports indicated that a second blast occurred at a nearby hotel. After the bomb exploded amid a large crowd waiting to be processed for travel at the airport's Abbey Gate, other Islamic State-Khorazan (ISIS-K) attackers opened fire. American troops also fired into the crowd to clear the area. It remains unclear how many lives were lost as a result of the gunfire.

Taylor also stated that the evacuation of US and allied officials, operatives and citizens, as well as Afghan collaborators with the two-decade-long neocolonial occupation, was continuing. He said that 89 flights had left Kabul in the previous 24 hours carrying a total of some 12,500 people. Among them were 300 Americans, taking the total of Americans who have left since the Taliban came to power to over 5,100. Two flights carrying 18 wounded American soldiers left for the Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

Since evacuations began on August 14, some 111,000 people have been flown out. Taylor confirmed that another 5,400 people are inside the airport waiting to leave.

At a White House briefing later in the day, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki confirmed that the Biden administration's national security team believed that a further terrorist attack prior to the August 31 deadline for the end of the evacuation and withdrawal of US troops was "likely." She added that "maximum force protection" measures were being taken at the airport.

It was made clear at both briefings that the numbers being evacuated over the coming days will drop sharply as US troops begin the process of withdrawal. Taylor declared, however, that it will be possible to evacuate people "until the very end."

That remains to be seen, with a Taliban spokesman claiming late Friday that the organization had taken over control of parts of the airport. Although the Pentagon promptly denied the report, BBC chief international correspondent Lyse Doucet, who is currently in Kabul, was informed by sources that American and British troops would hand over control of the airport to the Taliban in a matter of hours.

The extent to which Washington is dependent on coordinating and cooperating with the Taliban in the final stages of its withdrawal underscores the scale of the debacle suffered

by US imperialism with the collapse of its puppet regime in Kabul. Even Biden administration officials were forced to acknowledge that the outcome of the remainder of the mission is to a considerable degree dependent on the Taliban's support.

Asked whether coordination with the Taliban was the best of many bad options, or the only option, Psaki frankly responded, "Maybe both." She added that "by necessity, that is our option," because the Taliban controls "wide swathes" of Afghanistan and the area surrounding the airport. The coming days would be the "most dangerous period to date" in US military operation, she added in a prepared statement.

For its part, the Taliban appears to be offering an olive branch to Washington with its appeal, reported by the State Department yesterday, for the US to retain a diplomatic presence in Kabul after August 31. A Taliban spokesman also told *al-Jazeera* that the movement planned to announce an "inclusive caretaker government," including members from the Uzbek and Tajik minorities.

Under questioning, Defense Department and State Department officials went out of their way to reject accusations of Taliban complicity in, or responsibility for, Thursday's attack, the background to which remains murky.

ISIS-K claims to be a regional affiliate of Islamic State, and perpetrated a series of attacks that strengthened the US-backed puppet regime. Whatever the current affiliation of this organization, which reportedly has less than 2,000 followers in Afghanistan, it remains a fact that all of the Islamist militias, including Islamic State and the Taliban, are the product of the tragic encounter experienced by Afghanistan and the broader region with over four decades of US imperialist intrigue and brutal neocolonial war.

Underscoring the disastrous outcome of these policies for the imperialist strategists in Washington, even some of Biden's fiercest critics have tacitly accepted that the US has no alternative but to withdraw. In a press conference convened Friday in response to the previous day's terrorist attack, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy denounced Biden for "weakness and incompetence," and for accepting a "Taliban-dictated deadline." But when it came to explaining his alternative course of action, all he could offer was a call for the reconvening of the House to receive a confidential intelligence briefing and adopt a

bill that would prohibit US troops from withdrawing until “every single American” has been evacuated.

Retaining an American military presence in the war-ravaged country would require the deployment of tens, if not hundreds of thousands of troops. Biden and his foreign policy and national security advisers have ruled this out because they view such an expenditure of military and financial resources as a diversion from the main conflicts they confront, against Russia and above all China.

These geostrategic considerations are buried in the media coverage, which portrays the American and allied soldiers as saviors rushing to the rescue of the Afghan people to protect them from barbarism and death. American soldiers are “saving as many people as they can,” Taylor proclaimed at Friday’s Pentagon press briefing, and are engaged in a “noble mission.”

This militarist claptrap has been repeated ad nauseam by the media and political establishment in the United States, Canada and Western Europe. As Germany concluded its evacuation mission yesterday with the arrival of around 300 soldiers in the country, media outlets reported breathlessly about the returning heroes. The soldiers “brought thousands of people out of Afghanistan to safety,” wrote German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. “Our country is proud of you.”

In reality, the American soldiers and their European allies are leaving behind a war-ravaged country in which hundreds of thousands of Afghans were slaughtered and maimed by air strikes, night raids, torture and abuse carried out by the imperialist powers and their local collaborators.

The Cost of War Project estimates that 700 civilians were killed by allied air strikes during 2019 alone, the highest figure since the war began. Although US air strikes declined in 2020 after the Trump administration signed a ceasefire with the Taliban, those conducted by the Afghan Air Force, which was entirely dependent on the US for ammunition and maintenance, increased. Some 3,000 civilians were estimated to have lost their lives in the conflict during 2020.

The pro-imperialist stooge regime that presided over these horrendous conditions was up to its eyeballs in graft and corruption. While former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reportedly fled the country with over \$150 million in cash, 90 percent of the Afghan population was living on less than \$2 a day after two decades of US-led military occupation.

In a briefing released Friday that received far less attention than the fate of the comparative handful of people crowded around Kabul airport, the UN reported that up to half a million people could flee the country by the end of 2021 due to a looming food crisis. The UN reported that prior to the Taliban coming to power, half of the population required some form of humanitarian aid and half of all children under five years of age were acutely malnourished.

Since the beginning of 2021, 560,000 people have been registered as internally displaced, adding to the 2.9 million internally displaced persons at the end of 2020. Over 80 percent of those displaced since the beginning of the year are women and children.

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