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Examiner

## Petraeus uses misleading data to claim progress in Afghanistan

By Michael Hughes

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During his farewell tour General David Petraeus told the New York Times his plan to turn around the war in Afghanistan was a success because “compared to the previous year, insurgent attack numbers are lower”. However, reports issued by key international aid organizations invalidated the General's claims, which appear to be based on faulty data.

Evidently, Petraeus - who is exiting Afghanistan to become CIA director - was referring to the number of "enemy initiated attacks" against coalition forces that took place "in recent weeks", according to NATO spokesman Brigadier General Josef Blotz. Thus, attacks against civilians were excluded from Petraeus' dubious data set.

Kate Clark of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) wondered how a few weeks worth of cherry-picked figures could prove anything. Clark contends that after looking at the violence being endured by Afghan civilians overall, Petraeus' spin is completely divorced from reality.

Nic Lee, the Director of the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) rejected the U.S. military's findings, saying, “Neither we nor anyone we know has any data which would support this conclusion – indeed, the available data supports the opposite conclusion”.

According to ANSO's recent assessment of the war, insurgent attacks - against all targets, including civilians - have increased by 42% in the first six months of this year compared to 2010 and has risen by 119% since the surge began in June 2009. The report concluded that the military surge was not working and that "by all measures, Afghanistan is a more violent country today than it was in 2009".

And the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported that 1,462 civilians were killed in the first six months of 2011, a 15% increase versus 2010, with May being the deadliest month for Afghan civilians since 2007. Overall, 3,600 civilians were killed or injured during this period - the highest civilian casualty rate since the war began.

UNAMA also reported that 191 civilians, generally key tribal figures or government officials, were assassinated in the first half of 2011, up from 181 in the first half of last year. The Taliban's assassination campaign has been eliminating the very local and provincial officials who are supposed to take charge of the country during the security transition.

The upward trend, according to ANSO, is due to the surge running up against an "effective counter-adaption", a dynamic which it calls a "perpetually escalating stalemate", in which increased violence by the international military has been met by increased violence from the Taliban and other groups.

Erica Gaston, in a recent Foreign Policy piece, said that the level of nation-wide violence reflected in the UN's report makes it difficult to trust any statements by military leaders claiming Afghanistan is on the road to stability. Gaston writes:

Recently, the same officials claimed that their increased counter-terrorism campaign, most prominent in the ramping up of night raids, has insurgents on the run. With COIN long out of vogue, the Obama Administration appears to have embraced targeted kill-and-capture operations as the future of guaranteeing U.S. and Afghan security interests in the longer term. The U.N. report offers a different picture of the future: even with the highest level of targeted operations since 2002 (at least 20 night raids a night), insurgents have still made 2011 the bloodiest year on record.

In fact, Petraeus' kill-and-capture program, which the U.S. claims has been effective in protecting civilians, has actually had an adverse effect on the population, a counterintuitive notion Clark explains in an AAN study released last month.

As the Taliban command-and-control structure is weakened through targetted killings via airstrikes, drone attacks and night raids - the leadership void is being filled by younger and more radicalized Taliban from across the border, criminally-minded fighters who simply want to exploit the chaos for personal gain, and foreign jihadists who are independently powerful, all elements who do not feel constrained by the typical Afghan Taliban Code of Conduct (Layha) and have no qualms about abusing the local populace.

UNAMA asserted that civilians will only “win” in Afghanistan when casualties decrease. Right now, civilians are caught in the middle of the conflict with nowhere to run, and the idea of choosing sides is "simply illusory", as the report put it. A civilian from Marja district in Helmand province captured this point vividly, telling UNAMA reps:

“The Taliban come to any house they please, by force. Then they fire from the house and then ISAF and ANA fire at the house. But if I tell the Taliban not to enter, the Taliban will kill me. So, what is the answer? Either ISAF kills me or the Taliban kills me. The people cannot live like this.”