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In the wake of the Afghan Election: NATO Intensifies Military Deployments, Carnage

By Rick Rozoff

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After NATO pledged 5,000 more troops for the war in Afghanistan at its sixtieth anniversary summit in Strasbourg, France and Kehl, Germany this April, U.S. President Barack Obama hailed the commitment as representing "a strong down payment on the future of our mission in Afghanistan and on the future of NATO."

The Alliance offer was in addition to Obama's own vow to deploy 21,000 more American forces to the war-racked nation where the U.S. is waging its longest war since that in Vietnam and NATO is fighting the first ground and first Asian war in its history. A conflict that will enter its ninth calendar year next month.

Not, never, willing to acknowledge that the Afghan war is in fact a war, Washington and Brussels from the time of the summit until now have attempted to justify their troop buildups in South Asia as motivated primarily by insuring that the second presidential election in Afghanistan since the joint U.S.-NATO invasion of 2001 proceeded uninterrupted. A ruthless counterinsurgency and bombing campaign was thus portrayed as another war for democracy.

The election occurred on August 20, seventeen days ago, and the results are to date inconclusive, with incumbent president Hamid Karzai in the lead with less than 50% of the vote and former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah with enough votes to force a run-off election.

A second round of elections will provide the pretext for NATO and the Pentagon to maintain current inflated troop numbers in the country, deployments that were announced by the contributing nations' governments as short-term ones specifically designated for August's election.

All that has occurred in the past two and a half weeks, however, belies claims by the U.S. and its NATO allies that anything other than an escalating, expanding and protracted war in South Asia is intended.

On September 4 German troops in Afghanistan's Kunduz province, who have been waging Germany's first deadly combat operations since the defeat of the Nazi regime in 1945, called in NATO air strikes against villages near their base.

Western media reports initially attempted to present what transpired as a bombing of alleged Taliban fighters who had commandeered NATO fuel tankers, killing scores of them.

However, the nation's largest news service, Pajhwok News Agency, dispatched a reporter to the scene who interviewed villagers near the sight of the bomb attack.

On September 5 he reported that "Residents of the Chahar Dara district in northern Kunduz province say more than 150 civilians were killed and 20 others wounded in Friday's air strike by NATO-led forces."

The reporter, Abdul Matin Sarfaraz, added: "Inhabitants of the area told Pajhwok Afghan News all those killed in the bombardment were civilians and there were no Taliban at the site at the time the attack took place. Fighters had left the scene after they asked the people to take fuel for free." [1]

A local village elder was cited by the same news source as claiming "chemical bombs were dropped on the villagers. The clothes of his nephews were not damaged but their bodies were badly charred...."

The Pajhwok Afghan News correspondent added, "A 50-year-old woman bitterly cried while standing in front of her ruined house.

"She said her three sons, husband and a grandson perished in the bombardment. Locals showed this reporter as many as 50 graves of civilian victims." [2]

The following day memorial services were held for the victims in twelve villages in the province.

The carnage is of a level that, if the figure of 150 civilians killed is accurate, it may be the worst bombing tally ever for Afghan civilians in one day, surpassing the 140 civilians killed in a U.S. bombing raid in Farah province this past May.

Malaysian political analyst Kazi Mahmood wrote that "The killing of civilians is common in Afghanistan. From soldiers who are so frightened of being killed that they just open fire on anyone who moves when they patrol Afghan streets or villages, to the NATO-US drones and aircraft that bomb villages, houses, weddings and other parties in order to subjugate the Afghans to their rule." [3]

The eight-year war has intensified in scope, in brutality, in callous disregard of human life throughout Afghanistan and during the past year into neighboring Pakistan. On August 27 a U.S. drone missile attack was launched into Pakistan's South Waziristan. A subcontinent

news report at the time provided these details:

"At least eight people were killed and several others injured in a US drone strike in South Waziristan's Kani Goram area on Thursday.

"According to sources, three missiles were fired from unmanned Predator aircraft targeting a house in the region killing eight people on the spot besides injuring many others." [4]

Six days earlier the U.S. perpetrated an even more deadly attack in a part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas [FATA] bordering the later target, this time North Waziristan. As is becoming typical, the missile strike was delivered on the Muslim day of worship on three houses in a small village, killing nineteen people.

"The attack, thought to come from an unmanned U.S. drone, occurred on Friday morning in a village in North Waziristan, an area on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan....[O]fficials, who cannot be named because they are not authorized to speak to media, said children were among the dead." [5]

Residents of the capital of North Waziristan, Miran Shan, "heard a huge noise which shattered windows in the town." [6]

By late last month the U.S. and NATO had launched at least 35 missile strikes inside Pakistan that have killed 350 people in a year's span. All of the above-described attacks occurred after the August 20 Afghan presidential election.

An analysis featured on the website of China's Xinhua News Agency on September 4entitled "'Obama's war'" has no end in sight" reminded readers that Western contentions that the war in Afghanistan is a "humanitarian" endeavour to reconstruct the battered nation and to conduct demonstration elections is contradicted by where American priorities have been placed.

"The United States has so far spent 223 billion U.S. dollars in its military efforts in Afghanistan" while non-military aid was only at "9.3 billion dollars last year." [7]

The author of the Xinhua commentary, Yang Qingchuan, indicates why his piece was given the title it was by writing:

"Obama has already planned to increase troops in Afghanistan to 68,000 this year.

"But military analyst Frederick Kagan said that number is not enough to achieve his objective.

"U.S. Army doctrine says that to effectively protect a local population in an insurgency, it requires one soldier for every 50 civilians. In Afghanistan, it means 320,000 troops are needed." [8]

He also asserted that White House spokesman Robert Gibbs has repeatedly used the word "under-resourced" in reference to the war in Afghanistan and quotes Gibbs as saying:

"For many years, our effort in Afghanistan has been under-resourced politically, military and economically." [9]

Almost eight full years into the 45-nation U.S. and NATO war in South Asia, the author recalls, attacks on American and NATO troops have quadrupled in the past two years with last month being the deadliest yet for both while the American-installed government in Kabul cannot claim to control more than a third of the country.

Far from heralding progress even from the Western military perspective, all recent developments indicate a war that will cost far more lives, those of invading forces but particularly of Afghans, and that will continue for not only years but decades.

A Reuters dispatch of September 3, "Gates opens door to possible Afghan troop increase," reports that Pentagon chief Robert Gates, "A former CIA chief who helped mujahideen rebels drive the Soviets from Afghanistan," was, two weeks after the presidential election, "open to sending additional troops."

The same story reports that Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, special adviser to the commander of all the more than 100,000 American and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal, "said last month that between 15,000 and 45,000 new U.S. combat troops - the equivalent of three to nine brigades - may have to be sent to Afghanistan above the 21,000 additional forces that Obama approved earlier this year." [10]

At the end of August McChrystal himself "delivered a classified assessment that is widely seen as the groundwork for a fresh request to add more American forces next" and Tony Blankley of the Heritage Foundation wrote in the Washington Times that "McChrystal is probably going to ask for 20,000 to 40,000 more American troops." [11]

American troop strength is already slated to reach 68,000 shortly and another 40,000 soldiers on top of that would mean 108,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. With Anthony Cordesman's larger figure the total is 113,000.

Toward the end of last month the American Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, met with the top U.S. and NATO military commanders in northern, southern, eastern and western Afghanistan and "NATO military commanders told U.S. President Barack Obama's envoy...that they needed more troops and other resources to beat back a resurgent Taliban, particularly in eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistan border," as "U.S. officials increasingly see the fight against the Taliban as a 'single battlefield' that runs from Afghanistan into the tribal areas of Pakistan." [12]

At roughly the same time the chief of the Pentagon's Central Command (CENTCOM) General David Petraeus, also indicating that the war won't end anytime soon, announced that he "plans to open an in-house intelligence organization at U.S. Central Command this week that will train military officers, covert agents and analysts who agree to focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan for up to a decade." [13]

Ending the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan may not at all be what the U.S. and NATO plan.

Russian analyst Andrei Konurov wrote on September 3 that Washington and Brussels have far broader geostrategic objectives in South and Central Asia, throughout Eurasia and ultimately the world, to abandon the positions that the war in South Asia has provided them.

In particular he observed that "The US has deployed 19 military bases in Afghanistan and Central Asian countries since the war began in October, 2001.

"These bases function autonomously from the surrounding space, are networked by airlifts, and get supplies from outside of Afghanistan, also mostly by air. The system of bases makes it possible for the US to exert military pressure on Russia, China, and Iran." [14]

The portents for the writer's own nation, he details, are ominous.

"As for Russia, this is a manifestation of a long-term US geopolitical strategy aimed at separating Russia from seas and locking it up in the Eurasian inland.

"More advanced phases of the strategy envision the US advancement deep into Eurasia, gaining positions in it that would weaken Russia's control over its territory, and - eventually - the elimination of the Russian statehood in Siberia and the Far East. Considering that in any war the US mainly relies on its air force, the above strategy can be implemented with the help of a network of isolated bases and does not require control over the entire territory of Afghanistan." [15]

The above scenario was given credence when CENTCOM's General Petraeus visited the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan last month. The first two nations border China and Kazakhstan borders both China and Russia. He secured transit and other rights from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – both members with Russia of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and with Russia and China of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

While he was in Uzbekistan, also both a CSTO and SCO member state, "The U.S. and Uzbek ministries of defense...signed an agreement on military cooperation,including training and educational exchanges." [16]

As Petraeus was securing the use of military bases in nations bordering Russia and China, the Press Trust of India reported that "India and the US are going to hold their largest-ever exercise involving armoured elements in the first week of October....

"This would be the second Indo-US military training exercise in the year after the first one took place in Belgaum in January this year." [17]

A news story of the day before reported that "India's Ministry of Defense reports hows India's emergence as the world's biggest arms importing country, spending more than 6 billion U.S. dollars on arms almost every year" and "On August 15,two U.S. Boeing F-18E/F fighters conducted a test flight at an Air Force base in Bangalore, southern India." [18]

The war in South Asia has not only pulled all five Central Asian states into its orbit but has served as the basis for Washington incorporating the world's second most populous nation

into what for the past half decade has been referred to as Asian NATO.

NATO member states and Partnership for Peace candidates are also being called upon for more troops, warplanes and artillery and the Afghan war continues to be the training ground for the creation of a NATO-led international expeditionary military force.

Late in August NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was in the Baltics and after meeting with Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė made comments characterized by a German news agency as "NATO [is] to stay in Afghanistan despite record casualties." [19]

The Alliance's chief paid a visit to Turkey on August 27 during which he demanded and received a pledge for a doubling of Turkish troops for the Afghan war. Shortly afterward "NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said he won't rule out the need for more troops in Afghanistan." [20]

On September 4 Rasmussen also pushed to integrate the EU more comprehensively into the Alliance's war by demanding "NATO and the European Union must work together more closely in Afghanistan." [21]

In Kunduz, German troops have, in addition to calling in the September 4 bombing raid that killed 150 Afghans, been engaged in deadly combat for the first time since the Nazi Wehrmacht's campaigns of 1939-1945.

"The area around Kunduz has become increasingly dangerous for the approximately 4,000-strong German troop contingent stationed there. In recent weeks, insurgents have repeatedly ambushed patrols and engaged German soldiers in hours-long firefights." [22]

The German Bundestag has only authorized a maximum of 3,500 troops to Afghanistan, but Berlin has already found a way to circumvent that limit for NATO's intensified war in Afghanistan.

On September 4 four German soldiers were wounded in a bomb attack on their base in Kunduz, a day after their commanders ordered the deadly NATO air strike.

Early this month French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner pledged to keep his nation's almost 3,000 troops in Afghanistan long past the August 20 election and "ruled out the departure of troops", saying "foreign militaries will not leave Afghanistan...." [23]

On the same day French Defense Minister Herve Morin announced "The French Army will buy 332 more armored vehicles for infantry combat (VBCI) to bring the total ordered number to 630" and that "Part of the combat vehicles ordered by the ministry may be deployed in Afghanistan to enforce the French force there" and to be added to Tiger attack helicopters and Caesar long-range self-propelled artillery already deployed there.

A description of what France is adding to its Afghan arsenal was given by the same news source: "The VBCI combat vehicle can hold a combat crew of 11 persons, with a full load of 30 tons and a maximum speed of 100 kilometers an hour." [24]

On September 4 a French soldier was killed and nine seriously wounded in an improvised

bomb attack north of the Afghan capital, bringing the nation's death toll to 30.

In announcing last July that he was preparing more troops for the war in Afghanistan, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero stated "It's not so much a question of what Obama can do for us, but what we can do for Obama.

Earlier, at the end of last year, the Spanish Cortes lifted a 3,000-troop limit for Afghanistan. This past Friday the nation's defense minister pledged more troops for the war, and on the following day Prime Minister Zapatero said that 200 additional troops have been assigned for deployment. The 200 will be in addition to 1,000 permanently stationed there and another 450 sent "to boost security for elections held on Aug. 20" [25], although "Zapatero said last month in an interview with The New York Times that those additional troops could remain in the Asian nation after the elections" [26], making in all 1,650. Spain has lost 87 soldiers in incidents related to the Afghan War.

The comments by the Spanish prime and defense ministers came days after their nation's troops engaged in a deadly firefight on September 3, claiming to have killed thirteen attackers.

The day before the Afghan presidential election the Deputy Chief of the Polish General Staff, General Mieczyslaw Stachowiak, said his nation "intends to spend 1 billion zloty (up to 300 mln euros) on new equipment for Polish troops based in Afghanistan.

"The so-called Afghan Package includes five new helicopters, 60 MRAP [Mine Resistant Ambush Protected] vehicles and two mid-range unmanned surveillance planes. Polish soldiers are to have a total of 11 helicopters at their disposal." [27]

On September 2 Defense Minister Bogdan Klich, after meeting with top NATO and U.S. commander Stanley McChrystal, paid an unannounced visit to the base in Ghazni where 2,000 Polish troops are stationed to "inform Polish commanders of a new government plan to upgrade equipment for the mission - the so-called 'Afghan Package'" consisting of some \$450 million worth of new weapons. "Polish soldiers serving in Afghanistan will receive mortars, sights, large caliber rifles. Next year will see the purchase of two new helicopters while the ones currently in service are to be modernized." [28]

On September 5 the Polish Defence Ministry revealed that one of its soldiers was killed and five injured in a bomb attack in Ghazni. Poland has now lost 11 troops in the war.

In late August the British prime minister's official website announced the deployment of more attack helicopters and armored vehicles to the Afghan war front and Prime Minister Gordon Brown himself gave "a strong indication that more British troops will be sent to Afghanistan" while on an emergency trip to the country. [29]

Increased British troop strength could soon push the nation's numbers to over 10,000. On September 3 the Ministry of Defence confirmed the death of the 211th soldier in Afghanistan, the highest British military death toll since the wars in Korea and Malaya in the 1950s.

On the same day that Britain suffered its latest fatality, three Dutch soldiers were wounded in

a roadside bomb attack in Uruzgan province.

Late last month Czech Defense Minister Martin Bartak said that he was prepared to extend the deployment of "the crack 601st special forces unit" and add other troops to an Afghan deployment that shows no prospect of ever ending. [30]

The Finnish press reported on September 1 that Washington was pressuring the nation, which has already doubled its troops in Afghanistan and fought in its first deadly combat since World War II, for more soldiers. Finnish Defense Ministry spokesman Jyrki Iivonen told a local news agency that "the United States issues these requests on an almost monthly basis." [31]

Finland's neighbor Sweden now has 450 troops in Northern Afghanistan, where the two Scandinavian nations are in charge of NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in four provinces.

In late August a U.S. Air Force website published a story called "AGOS helps NATO train Estonian, Swedish troops for deployment" which detailed that the U.S. Air Forces in Europe Air Ground Operations School [AGOS] and the International Security Assistance Force Cell at the NATO Allied Air Component Command Headquarters at Ramstein, Germany jointly trained Estonian and Swedish military personnel as forward air controllers, which "known to the U.S. military as joint terminal attack controllers, are responsible for calling in air strikes during close air support operations." [32]

In the Caucasus it was revealed last week that "NATO and Azerbaijan are discussing the possibility of using the country's air space by the alliance's contingents to reach Afghanistan."

An unnamed NATO official was quoted as adding "We are holding talks [about using the air space] with several countries including Azerbaijan." [33] The other countries may well include Georgia and Turkmenistan.

The commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, General James Conway, was in neighboring Georgia on August 21 to inaugurate the training of Georgian troops for counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.

Last week Bulgarian servicemen trained in Macedonia for deployment to Afghanistan, as the Balkans continues to serve as a NATO recruitment base for wars abroad.

Washington and Brussels have stepped up pressure on NATO's Contract Country military partners - Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea – to reinforce, redeploy and deploy for the first time troops to Afghanistan.

U.S. Green Beret-trained Colombian special forces are heading to the nation to serve under NATO command. Their arrival will signify a new benchmark: Troops from five continents and the Middle East will be part of NATO's Afghan war.

The main victims of the invasion and the increasingly deadly war in Afghanistan are and will remain Afghans.

But last month marked the deadliest month ever for both the United States and NATO in their joint war that will begin its ninth year in October.

A CNN poll released on September 1 showed that 57% of Americans surveyed now oppose the war in Afghanistan, the highest figure ever, up from 54% in July and 46% in April.

It is unlikely that there is a single NATO nation in which a majority of the population doesn't share this sentiment. The bloc routinely refers to itself as an alliance of democracies. There is nothing democratic about waging a war of aggression against an all but defenseless people in South Asia while the citizens of even the aggressor states oppose it.

Notes

- 1) Pajhwok Afghan News, September 5, 2009
- 2) Ibid
- 3) World Future Online, September 4, 2009
- 4) Asian News International, August 27, 2009
- 5) CNN International, August 23, 2009
- 6) Agence France-Presse, August 21, 2009
- 7) Xinhua News Agency September 4, 2009
- 8) Ibid
- 9) Ibid
- 10) Reuters, September 3, 2009
- 11) Russia Today, September 1, 2009
- 12) Reuters, August 23, 2009
- 13) Washington Times, August 24, 2009
- 14) Strategic Culture Foundation, September 3, 2009
- 15) Ibid
- 16) Russian Information Agency Novosti, August 20, 2009
- 17) Press Trust of India, August 21, 2009
- 18) People's Daily, August 20, 2009
- 19) Deutsche Presse-Agentur, August 25, 2009
- 20) Bloomberg News, August 31, 2009
- 21) Reuters, September 4, 2009
- 22) Deutsche Welle, September 5, 2009
- 23) Press TV, September 3, 2009
- 24) Xinhua News Agency, September 3, 2009
- 25) Reuters, September 5, 2009
- 26) EFE News, September 1, 2009
- 27) Polish Radio, August 19, 2009
- 28) Polish Radio, September 2, 2009
- 29) Trend News Agency, August 29, 2009
- 30) Czech News Agency, August 30, 2009
- 31) NewsRoom Finland, September 1, 2009
- 32) United States Air Forces in Europe, August 25, 2009
- 33) Interfax-Azerbaijan, August 31, 2009