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Gains in Kandahar Came with More Brutal US Tactics

Posted By Gareth Porter

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The Barack Obama administration's claim of "progress" in its war strategy is based on the military seizure of three rural districts outside Kandahar City in October.

But those tactical gains have come at the price of further exacerbating the basic U.S. strategic weakness in Afghanistan – the antagonism toward the foreign presence shared throughout the Pashtun south.

The military offensive in Kandahar, which had been opposed clearly and vocally by the local leadership in the province, was accompanied by an array of military tactics marked by increased brutality. The most prominent of those tactics was a large-scale demolition of homes that has left widespread bitterness among the civilians who had remained in their villages when the U.S.-NATO offensive was launched, as well as those who had fled before the offensive.

The unprecedented home demolition policy and other harsh tactics used in the offensive suggest that Gen. Petraeus has abandoned the pretense that he will ever win over the population in those Taliban strongholds.

The New York Times first reported the large-scale demolition of houses in a Nov. 16 story that said U.S. troops in Arghandab, Zhari and Panjwaii districts had been using armored bulldozers, high explosives, missiles and airstrikes in "routinely destroying almost every unoccupied home or unused farm building in areas where they are operating".

Neither U.S. nor Afghan officials have offered any estimate of the actual number of homes destroyed, but a spokesman for the provincial governor told the Times that the number of houses demolished was "huge".

Confirming the widespread demolition policy, Col. Hans Bush, a spokesman for Petraeus, suggested that it was necessary to provide security, because so many houses were "booby-trapped" with explosives.

But Bush also acknowledged that U.S. troops were using a wide array of "tools" to eliminate tree lines in which insurgents could hide. And the demolition policy was clearly driven primarily by ISAF's concerns about the IED war that the Taliban has been winning in 2010.

The *Washington Post*'s Rajiv Chandrasekaran revealed in a Nov. 19 article that, in one operation in Zhari district, the military had used more than a dozen mine clearing charges, each of which destroyed everything – houses, trees, and crops – in a 100-yard-long path wide enough for a tank.

The district governor in Arghandab, Shah Muhammed Ahmadi, acknowledged that entire villages had been destroyed – a policy he defended by claiming that there were no people left in them. "[I]n some villages, like Khosrow," he said, "that we've found completely empty and full of IEDs, we destroy them without agreement, because it was hard to find the people, and not just Khosrow but many villages we had to destroy to make them safe."

But Col. David Flynn, the battalion commander of a unit of the 101st Airborne Division responsible for a section of the district, contradicted the claim that demolition was only carried out if the people who owned the houses could not be found.

Flynn told reporters of London's *Daily Mail* he had issued an ultimatum to residents of Khosrow Sofia: provide full information on the location of IEDs the Taliban had planted there or face destruction of the village, according to the account published Oct. 26.

Flynn told the reporters that one of his platoons had a casualty rate of 50 percent in the village.

Flynn later claimed that the residents had responded to his threat by clearing out all the IEDs themselves, according to Carl Forsberg of the Institute for the Study of War. Researcher and author Alex Strick Van Linschoten, one of the only two Westerners to have lived independently in Kandahar City in recent years, said a friend had been told the same thing.

However, Linschoten told IPS that he understands from an eyewitness that at least two other villages in Flynn's area of responsibility, including the nearby Khosrow Ulya, were leveled and one was reduced to "a dust bowl".

District chief Ahmad referred to "Khosrow" as one of the villages he said the Americans "had to destroy to make them safe".

The threat to destroy a village if its residents did not come forward with information would be a "collective penalty" against the civilian population, which is strictly forbidden by the 1949 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

It is unclear how widely the threat to demolish homes was used in Zhari and Panjwaii and how many of the villages were destroyed in retribution for refusing to do so.

According to data provided by the Pentagon's Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO), however, only 13 IEDs were turned in by the population in the entire country in October. That suggests that the residents of the newly occupied villages in the three districts did not provide any information about IEDs.

The house demolition policy and the increased use of collective punishment were part of a broader strategy of increasing the pressure against the Pashtun population in the south. The level of targeted raids by U.S. Special Operations Forces against suspected Taliban was tripled before Petraeus took over command from Gen. Stanley McChrystal in June, even though McChrystal acknowledged publicly that those raids generated intense anger across the country against foreign forces.

Although those targeted raids killed and captured a large number of Taliban commanders, they also subjected thousands of part-time guerrillas and supporters to arrest and detention. The effort to weaken the Taliban insurgency through such violent tactics is bound to continue the cycle of more Pashtuns vowing revenge against foreign troops and rejecting the Afghan government.

Journalist Anand Gopal, a Dari-speaking specialist on Afghanistan, discovered another form of collective punishment practiced during the offensive. Gopal told IPS that people in Zhari district reported two cases in which U.S. and Afghan forces rounded up and detained virtually everyone in a village after receiving small arms fire from it.

The house demolitions in Kandahar have apparently affected many thousands of people. The demolitions "have made a whole lot of people very angry, because they will be cold and hungry in the coming months", said a U.S. source who asked not to be identified.

But the U.S.-NATO command is evidently unconcerned about that anger. Chandrasekaran quoted a "senior official" as asserting that, by forcing people to go to the district governor's office to submit their claims for damaged property, "in effect you're connecting the government to the people."

Now Brig. Gen. Nick Carter, commander of U.S.-NATO troops in southern Afghanistan, has openly embraced that justification of the house demolition policy. In an interview with AfPak Channel published last week, he suggested that the demolition of houses "allows the district governor to connect with the population…"

But that connection is certain to be marked by bitterness. A tribal elder in Panjawaii was quoted by the *Post*'s Chandrasekaran as dismissing the offer of compensation for houses destroyed as "just kicking dirt in our eyes."

The new level of brutality used in the Kandahar operation indicates that Petraeus has consciously jettisoned the central assumption of his counterinsurgency theory, which is that harsh military measures undermine the main objective of winning over the population.

But there are tell-tale signs that higher-level commanders in Kandahar know that those tactics will not defeat the Taliban either. Col. Flynn, the U.S. commander in a section of

Arghandab, told the Daily Mail, "At the end of the day, you cannot kill your way to victory here. It will have to be a political solution."