

Loosing in Afghanistan

By [Alberto Cruz](#)

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The Bush administration has asked for US\$198bn to keep the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan going through 2008. Not for reconstruction, nor to promote democratic institutions, nor, as they have been saying in their Orwell-speak until now, to strengthen security, but for war. Directly, now and without lexical subterfuge. It is a clear recognition that things are going badly for them, very badly. But if, in Iraq, their aim in life is to stay on to ensure control of the oil, as the construction of four super bases bear witness and as Bush confirmed in his most recent speech comparing that Arab country with South Korea, over in Afghanistan things are not quite so clear. With the invasion there, no energy advantages were envisaged in the medium to long term. It was mainly a geostrategic matter to worry China and weaken Russia on its southern flank, already practically encircled by NATO's expansion to its European frontiers and with US military bases in former Soviet Union countries like Georgia, Azerbaijan or Tajikstan. All of which served to require NATO's participation in Afghanistan's supposed "pacification and reconstruction". And the Europeans, both Old and New, as Rumsfeld would have said, lent themselves swiftly and surely, pursuing his gameplan in a new, pathetic display of their lack of an independent foreign policy, one not subordinated by the interests of empire.

The following table indicates the number of countries occupying Afghanistan right now.

26 NATO Countries Approx. number of troops in the ISAF: 39.500

11 Non-NATO countries

Italy

Hungary

Austria

Germany

Denmark

Sweden

Holland

Lithuania

Croatia

Spain

Czech Republic

Finland

France

Slovenia

Albania

Rumania

Bulgaria

Azerbaijan

Great Britain

Greece

Macedonia

Belgium

Estonia

Ireland

Norway

Slovakia

New Zealand

USA

Iceland

Switzerland

Portugal

Latvia

Australia

Turkey

Poland

Canada

Luxemburg

By asking for more money, Bush is explicitly acknowledging that he is losing in Afghanistan. A sorrowful tiger in a fix. The same is true of NATO, which cannot increase its troops – despite pleas from the US and from the UN – and which sees a daily climb in casualties. NATO has dressed up its presence in Afghanistan, just as in Lebanon, with bucolic language unrelated to reality. Proportionately, it is suffering more losses than the US : of the 694 deaths of occupying troops as of September 25th, 441 were from the United States and 253 from other countries. Apart from an Australian and two Swedes, all these others were troops from NATO, including the last two deaths from the Spanish contingent. In the 6 years of occupation so far the number of wounded is 6710. If one makes the comparison with Iraq (4099 dead and 36943 wounded) the proportions are similar, about ten wounded for every death.

What is the reason that the number of soldiers killed in Afghanistan is markedly less than in Iraq when in one country the intervention has lasted since 2001 and in the other since 2003? Well, in the first country the occupying force is much smaller and practically confined to urban centres. The presence in rural areas is so scarce that right now the various forces that make up the Afghan resistance control 75% of the country.

A diverse grouping of anti-occupation forces

It is mistaken to identify the whole spectrum of Afghan anti-occupation forces as Taliban. It is true that the Taliban have re-organized and that they make up the greater part of the resistance, but apart from them there are other components like the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (whose fiefdom is the northern province of Kunduz), nationalist resistance led by Jalalladin Hakkani, Al Qaeda militants, opium traffickers and all kinds of local fighters sick of Western arrogance and above all of the civilian casualties the occupiers have caused. More and more villages and towns are abandoning Karzai's puppet regime and going over to the insurrection. One should not forget that the collaborators' "star" program is the fight against opium production and that leads them to destroy all kinds of crops without taking into account that the great majority of the lands belong to impoverished rural families with no other means of support. That is just as true in the case of mercenaries belonging to Dyncorp (the US corporation that is supposed to do the same work in Colombia) as it is of occupation forces directed by Great Britain and of collaborationist troops. These last have an impressive record of robbery, rape, extortion, torture and murder, all with impunity. Repressing anti-occupation demonstrations is the order of the day. The collaborationist army is made up mostly of people of Tajik ethnic background, which makes the reaction of the Pathans (or Pashtuns, if one uses Anglo-Saxon etymology) completely normal. The Tajik militias were the main support of the US in its overthrow of the Taliban who are Pathans, the most numerous ethnic group in Afghanistan.

In this panorama of the resistance one should include a small left-wing faction, identified with Maoist thinking, which argues the possibility of armed struggle in its publications. This group, which also opposed the Soviet occupation, has kept itself going within the political struggle, albeit not militarily, but at the moment is warning that it is “in a preparatory stage for a people’s war against the imperialist occupation”. That change in the war would be qualitative and make the defeat of the occupiers, led by NATO, complete. No longer would they be facing a religion-driven (Taliban) insurrection but a political and economic one changing the balance of the war, leaving the occupiers with no case to argue.

The US, NATO and the UN are three sorry-looking tigers, losing it in Afghanistan (along with Karzai’s tutored semi-colonial government). At the moment, the military capacity of the diverse Afghan resistance organizations has grown four-fold since the September 2001 invasion. The Senlis Council, the organization most worried about the situation in Afghanistan, quite uncritical of the occupiers, has published a report in which the graphic reproduced below appears, showing the expansion of anti-occupation forces and how this has extended to 75% of the country, as pointed out earlier, with varying intensity but significant presence (1).

The UN does not say it so clearly, but the last Security Council Resolution (2) expresses concern over the “increase in violent and terrorist activities of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, illegally armed groups and those who participate in drugs trading.” Ban Ki-moon, the multinational organization’s Secretary General is clearer still in his most recent report (3) : “acts of violence perpetrated by insurgents and terrorists have increased at least 20% compared with 2006: an average of 548 incidents a month were reported in 2007 compared with a monthly average of 425 in 2006”.

At the start of 2007 the guerillas controlled just 20 districts in three provinces, Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan. So one has to attribute the rapid growth and extension of the anti-occupation forces to various causes, but mainly two. On the one hand, many functionaries of Karzai’s semi-colonial government support the guerrillas. On the other, continued repeated bombardments by NATO against whole villages (as happened this summer) has turned the Afghan population against the occupation.

The Afghanistan Radical Left said in a communiqué last July (4) that NATO is plunging Afghanistan into a bloodbath with the bombing of villages and massacres of civilians. In more moderate language, the Italian Foreign Affairs Minister showed a trace of honesty, rare among his colleagues, when he said “(civilian deaths) are not acceptable morally and are a disaster politically”. UN responsibility in the massacres is not trivial given that it gives legal cover to the US and to NATO. Thus the cited resolution expresses its “concern” for the civilian victims and calls on the International Security and Assistance Force (namely, NATO) and other international forces to “minimize” the risk of civilian casualties and to adopt “all possible measures to guarantee the lives of the civilian population, respect for international humanitarian law and human rights norms” (sic). A clear confession on the UN’s part of its pitiful state, having lost all credibility as guarantor of world security.

Anonymous massacres

Political opinion in Europe is anaesthetised, allowing NATO spokespersons to state shamelessly that ISAF and NATO forces behave differently to those of the United States, advising with 24 hours notice that they are going to bomb a village, so that if the inhabitants

fail to evacuate then no responsibility for any deaths attaches to the “Atlantic Alliance”. The dead person is responsible for their death for having stayed in their own home, on their own land. Given that the only testimonies on these pre-announced bombings, from Afghans, are always thrown into doubt by Western defenders of press freedom one has to have faith in the account of some Canadians after an incursion of their troops into a village : “of course the people evacuate the village but the troops don’t enter the buildings (which still stand) for fear of booby traps, for which reason they destroy the building, the barns and the wells and then tell people they can return” (5). Winning hearts and minds as in Vietnam or in Iraq. Then they turn up with a small indemnity (US\$2000, about €1430) for “collateral damage” if any deaths have occurred. But it turns out that only four countries do this consistently and neither the US, Great Britain, France nor Spain is among them.

Perhaps on account of testimonies such as these, or because Canada has more dead soldiers than any other except the United States, the opposition there wants to withdraw the troops. Only the Conservative Party with its small but inadequate parliamentary majority wants to hang on “until the job is done”. While similar debates go on in other countries with troops in Iraq, as regards those occupying Afghanistan, only Canada has taken the first step.

Just as in Iraq, there are no figures for the number of civilians killed by the occupation. Marc W. Herold, an economist in the University of New Hampshire has carried out a study showing 4643 dead civilians from September 2001 to October 2006. As is logical, this figure has increased considerably because since then NATO has increase bombing of civilian areas. The UN talks timidly of 1000 deaths between January 1st and August 1st of this year (6) covering itself by saying “in many cases security considerations limiting the Mission’s access to combat zones and the fact that one is dealing with a delicate political situation render difficult the collection of sufficient data to draw up a full report of incidents.” So one should hardly be surprised therefore that the growth of nationalist, anti US and anti-Western sentiment in general is swelling the ranks of the anti-occupation forces. The anti-occupation forces, generically identified as Taliban (so the term interiorizes itself in the collective subconscious as a synonym for uncivilized, while foreign troops are bringing progress) are accused of hiding among the civilian population, as if in an asymmetrical guerrilla war the guerrillas might say “Yoo-hoo! Here I am! – Come and bomb me out here in the open....!” But what is happening in Afghanistan is more and more a guerrilla war, perhaps even a most advanced phase. a war of movement.

The barbarism of the occupation is cooking up a brew of ever greater resistance although one that is a long way from being a left wing or progressive nationalist movement. Just as in Iraq, the right of the Afghan people to their sovereignty, self-determination and dignity is beyond doubt however much the occupying troops drape themselves in blue UN colours. The US, just as much as NATO or the UN, keep insisting that any withdrawal by the occupying troops in Afghanistan will leave a vacuum that will be filled by “extremists”. With anti-occupation forces in direct or indirect control of 75% of the country, this is no more than yet another Western fallacy. As happened in September 2006 when the Canadians and British congratulated themselves on having caused 500 casualties to the Taliban in Panjwai and in Zahri after two weeks of air attacks and repeating again and again they had those villages under control. But it turned out they could not show a single one of the alleged 500 casualties simply because the anti-occuaption fighters (whether they were Taliban or not) had disappeared. So they changed their story and said, “We forced the Taliban to flee”. These are the fairy tales Western public opinion listens to...until the deaths of their own troops or the kidnapping of their nationals returns them to reality.

That reality includes the UN which states that Afghanistan “liberated from Taliban brutality” produces 92% of the heroin consumed globally. A partial recognition that does not exempt it from responsibility or from defeat. The United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime (UNODC) states that Afghanistan is on the verge of turning into a “narco-State” although at the same time it acknowledges that “opium production is the main source of employment in Afghanistan” (7). The anti-occupation forces say the same. The UNODC reckoned that 165,000 hectares were dedicated to opium production in 2006, mostly in areas controlled by Karzai’s semi-colonial government and in areas with occupied military presence. So the opium is in the hands of the pro-Western elite and forms part of the counterinsurgency campaign. With the territorial expansion of the guerrillas and the control they have in these areas, opium is turning into an almost essential part of the anti-occupation war.

The US and its allies will not win the war in Afghanistan. Their strategy is a complete fiasco. The number of deaths will increase as the governing regime collapses, barely in control of the capital and a few provinces left to the whims of warlord allies. The US, NATO, the UN and the puppet Karzai are obviously on the defensive, facing a large majority of the Afghan population who reject them. The ever docile Ban Ki-moon says it with clarity, “In the degree to which pressure on the transition process in Afghanistan by the insurgency increases, with deficiencies in governance and the drugs-based economy, then the country’s government with help from the international community will have to show political will to take the energetic measures necessary to again create initiatives on each one of these issues and recover people’s confidence in a tangible way. If the government does not show firmer leadership, with greater coherence from the donors (including closer coordination between international civil and military participants in Afghanistan) and a firm commitment from neighbouring countries, many of the advances in security matters, institution building and development made since the Bonn Conference could remain stymied or even suffer a reverse.” (8).

Notes

(1) “Política de los talibanes y agravios legítimos afganos”, junio de 2007.

(2) Resolución 1776 (2007), 19 de septiembre de 2007.

(3) La situación en el Afganistán y sus consecuencias para la paz y la seguridad internacionales. Informe del secretario general. A/62/345?S/2007/555, apartado 7.

(4) “¿Hace la OTAN una misión de paz o bárbara en Afganistán?”, 29 de julio de 2007.

(5) “Desde Afganistán Ocupado: notas de una misión exploratoria”, Globalresearch, 18 de septiembre de 2007.

(6) La situación en el Afganistán y sus consecuencias para la paz y la seguridad internacionales. Informe del secretario general. A/62/345?S/2007/555, apartado 54.

(7) Servicio de Noticias de la ONU, 28 de junio de 2007.

(8) La situación en el Afganistán y sus consecuencias para la paz y la seguridad internacionales. Informe del secretario general. A/62/345?S/2007/555, apartado 74.

Translated from the Spanish original.

Alberto Cruz is a writer, journalist and political analyst specializing in International Relations. albercruz@eresmas.com, *Translation copyleft, tortilla con sal*, Centro de Estudios Políticos para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Desarrollo www.nodo50.org/ceprid

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