

## US “Surge” in Afghanistan in Disarray

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In the midst of one of the bloodiest weeks for US and NATO forces in the nearly nine-year war in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the overall commander, announced Thursday that major military operations around Kandahar would be delayed until September.

The offensive had been slated to begin this month, but, as McChrystal admitted, the US has been unable to win the support either of tribal leaders and power brokers or of the populace in and around Afghanistan’s second largest city. The town of 450,000 in the heart of the Pashtun-dominated south is the birthplace of the Taliban and remains a key stronghold of the anti-occupation insurgency.



The top US general in Afghanistan also acknowledged that the much-touted US offensive earlier this year against Marjah, an insurgent stronghold in rural Helmand province, had failed to uproot the Taliban, who retain control of much of the region.

One recent study found that the majority of the population in Marjah had become more antagonistic to NATO forces than before the operation. Late last month McChrystal referred to the region as “a bleeding ulcer.”

The worsening security situation for the US and NATO in Helmand was highlighted on

Thursday when British Prime Minister David Cameron, on his first trip to Afghanistan, was prevented from making a scheduled appearance at a military base in the province after British officers intercepted calls indicating that insurgents were planning to shoot down his helicopter.

So far this month, at least 35 NATO soldiers have been killed, including at least 23 Americans. The week's bloody toll began on Sunday, June 6, when 6 NATO troops were killed. The next day, 10 NATO troops were killed, 7 of them Americans. That was the deadliest day for occupation forces since the killing of 11 US troops in a helicopter crash last October.

On Tuesday, two US soldiers and a British soldier were killed in separate incidents in the south. On Wednesday, four more US soldiers died when their helicopter was shot down in Helmand province. A fifth NATO soldier was killed the same day.

Four additional NATO troops were killed Friday, including two Americans. On Saturday, a Polish soldier was killed in Ghazni province in eastern Afghanistan, and a second NATO soldier was killed in the north.

The death toll so far this year for US and NATO forces is more than double that of a year ago. Since the start of the war, more than 1,100 US soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan. This month, the war in Afghanistan surpassed Vietnam as the longest war in US history.

To date, the US and its allies have little to show for the increased carnage, which is far worse for the Afghan people. Speaking Thursday, on the first day of a two-day meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels, McChrystal hinted at the massive popular opposition, especially in the Pashtun south, to the US-led occupation.

Explaining the decision to delay the start of the military offensive in Kandahar, he said, "When you go to protect people, the people have to want you to protect them."

He suggested that the operation in and around Kandahar would continue at least until the end of the year, telling the *Financial Times*, "Operationally, it will be tough to the end of the year, casualties will stay high and may go higher than they are now."

At the NATO meeting, Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen tried to put the best possible face on the situation, declaring that NATO forces had regained the initiative in the war. However, in a statement read on Friday to the 28 assembled defense ministers, he said soberly that military operations were making only "measured progress," adding, "Significant challenges remain and success is not yet assured."

Speaking in London on Wednesday, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates issued a warning that the US and its allies were running out of time in Afghanistan. He said NATO forces had to achieve a strategic breakthrough against the Taliban by the end of the year.

"The one thing none of the [alliance's] publics...including the American public, will tolerate," he said following a meeting with his British counterpart, "is the perception of stalemate in which we're losing young men."

At the NATO conference, Gates pressed NATO members to provide an additional 450 troops to serve as trainers of Afghan forces.

Gates' warning was underscored by a *Washington Post*/ABC poll released Thursday in which 53 percent of respondents said the war was "not worth fighting"—the highest percentage in three years. Perhaps even more ominously for the Obama administration, the poll found that 39 percent of the public believe that the US is losing the war, just 3 percentage points less than the 42 percent who believe the US is winning.

This evidence of mounting popular opposition coincides with the arrival in Afghanistan of the final 10,000 of 30,000 additional US troops ordered to the country as part of the military "surge" announced by Obama last December.

Despite Gates's warning of the need for clear evidence of US-NATO victories by the end of the year, McChrystal in interviews and statements last week refused to make any such promises. Speaking to the *Financial Times* about the prospects for Kandahar by year's end, he said, "Around the city, security will still be in the middle of a difficult struggle.... Those areas will go from Taliban control to at least being contested."

Asked Thursday in Brussels whether the delay in the start of major operations in Kandahar leaves time by the end of the year for a decisive outcome, McChrystal would say only: "It will be very clear by the end of the calendar year that the Kandahar operation is progressing. I don't know whether we'll know whether it's decisive. Historians will tell us that."

This does not mean that the offensive, when it begins, will be any less bloody. The operational plan for Kandahar calls for US Special Forces hit squads to assassinate insurgent leaders within the city and in its environs and then deploy more than 10,000 US troops to begin clearing entrenched Taliban forces from the outlying districts, 80 percent of which are estimated to be controlled by insurgents. The operation will eventually involve house-to-house raids in which suspected Taliban militants or supporters will be killed or arrested.

The US intelligence web site Stratfor on Thursday posted a grim assessment of the US position in Afghanistan—one that doubtless reflects the thinking in sections of the American military and intelligence establishment. It stated: "In short, the US-led effort in the Afghan south is encountering serious problems....

"The problem for Washington and Kabul is twofold, however. First, the entire concept of operations is not working as expected. It is becoming increasingly clear that there were some key misjudgments about the nature and strength of the Taliban in the country's south. Secondly, and intertwined with the first, the lack of a decisive success and the delay of the Kandahar security offensive means perceptions of the surge are shifting in the Taliban's favor, dimming the prospects for the United States and its allies....

"The Taliban enjoys widespread popular support in this part of the country, making the battle of perceptions vital to convincing the population to break with the Islamist movement....

"Ultimately, the population in Marjah is—by no means entirely, but sufficiently broadly—uninterested in coalition offers of governance, money and development....

"The momentum the ISAF [NATO's International Security Assistance Force] had hoped to build after the assault on Marjah was already gone before the Kandahar delay announcement further weighed it down."

One result of the US offensive in Helmand province has been increased Taliban activity in Nimroz, the province to the west of Helmand that borders on Iran and Pakistan. The *Army Times* reported June 11 that Taliban fighters forced out of Helmand have shifted operations to Nimroz, previously considered the most stable part of southern Afghanistan.

Following the assassination of one of its members and death threats against others, the entire governing council of Nimroz fled to Kabul to plead for protection from the central government.

The military-security crisis facing the US is compounded by the increasingly open rift between Washington and its puppet Afghan president, Hamid Karzai. At the June 2-4 "peace jirga" convened by Karzai, the US-installed president appealed for reconciliation with the Taliban.

The event, which brought together hundreds of warlords and power brokers from across Afghanistan, underscored the isolation and weakness of the regime in Kabul and the failure of the US and NATO to secure even the capital city. Karzai's opening speech was interrupted by the sound of rockets being fired on the assembly. Moreover, leading figures in the Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance, upon which Washington relied to defeat the Pashtun Taliban in the October 2001 invasion, refused to attend the jirga.

After the meeting, Karzai announced, to the consternation of Washington and NATO, the formation of a commission to release some imprisoned Taliban militants. At the same time, Karzai sacked his interior minister, Hanif Atmar, and his intelligence director, Amrullah Saleh, who opposed his efforts to come to terms with the Taliban and mend fences with Pakistan. Both fired ministers have close ties to the CIA and the British MI6 intelligence agencies.

The Americans privately blame Karzai for the lack of success in the offensive in Marja, claiming that he failed to provide promised Afghan military and civilian forces to "hold" the region after it had been "cleared" of Taliban. Karzai and his half-brother Ahmed Ali Karzai, the strongman of Kandahar, now appear to be encouraging local tribal leaders who are resisting the planned US offensive in the city.

Both the *New York Times* and the British *Guardian* newspaper published articles citing aids to Saleh as saying that Karzai has "lost confidence in the capability of the coalition" to defeat the Taliban. The *Times* article (June 12) alleges that Karzai has been conducting secret peace negotiations with the Taliban.

According to these reports, Karzai is seeking to save his regime and his own neck in the event of an American defeat or withdrawal by maneuvering for some sort of deal with the Taliban, perhaps brokered by Pakistan.

Some idea of the poisoned state of relations between Washington and Karzai can be seen in the claim by Saleh's aides, reported in the *Guardian* (June 9), that Karzai accused Saleh and Atmar of plotting with the Americans and the British to fire the rockets at the jirga in order to wreck his peace plan.

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