

Afghanistan: Obama's escalation begins

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WSWS, February 17, 2010

The offensive begun February 13 against the town of Marjah is the first major effort undertaken by the US military in Afghanistan since President Barack Obama ordered the intensification of the US war effort and the dispatch of 30,000 additional American troops. The attack on Marjah is the largest US military operation in the war since the initial 2001 invasion ordered by George W. Bush.

Marjah is to be followed by a series of escalating offensive thrusts across Helmand and Kandahar, the two heavily populated provinces in southern Afghanistan that have been the focal point of guerrilla resistance to the US occupation regime. According to figures published last month, these two provinces alone account for more than 600 of the 1,600 deaths among American and NATO troops in the Afghanistan war.

The methods being employed in Marjah give a glimpse of what the Obama administration and the Pentagon have in store for the Afghan people throughout this year, particularly once the spring weather makes possible more aggressive deployment of US firepower, especially warplanes and helicopter gunships whose use is curtailed during the winter.

The claim by US officials, parroted by the media, that the offensive would be conducted with minimal civilian deaths was blown apart on Sunday, when 12 people were killed in a military strike against a house in the small city of about 80,000 people. Among the dead were 6 children. In total, up to 20 civilians have been killed, according to media reports.

In addition, the US military says that it has killed about 100 of the estimated 400 resistance fighters using rifles and rocket-propelled grenades to oppose 15,000 heavily armed US, British, Canadian and Afghan puppet troops, backed by warplanes, drones and artillery. The US routinely refers to anyone resisting the occupation as Taliban, and it is impossible to determine how many of these dead were actually combatants.

An Italian medical agency has also charged NATO forces with blocking injured Afghans from being transported to hospitals in Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital. In Kandahar Province, east of Marjah, five civilians were killed in an air strike—another "mistake," according to US officials.

After establishing control of the city, occupation forces plan a door-to-door sweep in search of opponents of the

occupation. With one invading soldier for every five people in the Marjah area, there will no doubt be many more civilian casualties to come.

The operation in Marjah was launched from the beginning as a propaganda offensive, aimed as much at the American people as the Afghan. A "success" in Marjah is intended to demonstrate the viability of Obama's surge in Afghanistan and the counterinsurgency strategy of the top US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal.

The American media, consisting largely of reporters "embedded" in various military units who submit their stories to military censorship, has dutifully parroted the line of the government—that it is doing all it can to minimize civilian casualties and win the "hearts and minds" of the Afghan people. McChrystal has boasted that NATO forces are bringing in tow a "government in a box" that is ready to take charge, and, supposedly, bestow peace and prosperity on Marjah.

The civilian deaths are inevitably presented as unfortunate but inevitable. This is accompanied by discussion about the supposed constraints placed on US actions to avoid civilian deaths, increasing the danger facing soldiers. The corollary of this line is predictable: the unleashing of militarist violence and atrocities on a broader scale will be presented as the frustrated response of soldiers to these undue restrictions and blamed on those resisting the occupation.

The offensive to take control of Marjah is only the first step in a southern offensive in the Helmand and Kandahar provinces, the heartland of the guerrilla resistance to the foreign occupation and the corrupt stooge regime of President Hamid Karzai. This is to be accomplished through widespread killing, the systematic and brutal repression of anyone who resists the right of the US to occupy Afghanistan.

Once US control is consolidated in Marjah and central Helmand province, and as more US reinforcements arrive in the spring, larger and bloodier campaigns are in store, culminating in an onslaught on Kandahar, Afghanistan's second city and the birthplace of the Taliban, ruled by the president's brother, drug kingpin Ahmad Wali Karzai, during the day, and by the Taliban at night.

With a population of nearly half a million, Kandahar is comparable in size to Fallujah, the Iraqi city that was largely destroyed by US troops in November 2004 and has been cited by military officials as a model for the present campaign.

The criminal operation being carried out under the direction

of the Obama administration has been accompanied by the silence of the middle class "anti-war" organizations in the US. These groups have been thoroughly compromised by their support for Obama and in fact defend the basic aims of the US in the war.

The flagship of these organizations, The Nation magazine, has not published a single article on its website on the offensive in Marjah. What commentary that is published on Afghanistan is concentrated on tactical questions facing the ruling class, including whether or not American forces should engage in negotiations with sections of the Taliban.

The offensive in southern Afghanistan demonstrates that the coming to power of Barack Obama and the Democratic Party has done nothing to halt the escalation of American militarism. The Afghan surge has been combined with a sharp increase in US drone missile attacks on Pakistan, which killed 123 civilians in January; the opening up of a new front of the "war on terror" in Yemen; growing threats against Iran; and increasingly provocative actions against China.

The expansion of war is determined by the fundamental interests of American capitalism, including establishing control over the geo-strategically central regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. War is the outward expression of the predatory interests of the American financial elite. The ballooning military budgets, like the massive bank bailouts, will be paid for through cuts in social programs and the intensification of the exploitation of the working class.

It is necessary to launch a renewed struggle against war, including the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and other foreign troops from Afghanistan. Such a struggle must proceed from the basic understanding that the fight against war must be a fight against capitalism, the Obama administration and both parties of big business. It requires the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

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