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Taliban attack kills three US soldiers in Afghanistan

Three US soldiers were killed in Afghanistan Tuesday when an improvised explosive device tore through their armored vehicle on a roadside in the southeastern province of Ghazni. Another three US soldiers and an American military contractor were wounded.

The attack inflicted the highest casualty toll on US forces in 17 months, when, in a so-called “insider” incident in June 2017, an Afghan National Army soldier opened fire on his ostensible US allies, killing three soldiers. The Taliban claimed credit for that incident as well as the most recent one.

Following Tuesday’s attack, US helicopters swept in, evacuating the dead and wounded and carrying out intense air strikes on the surrounding area.

The US losses in Ghazni follow on the heels of the death three days earlier of Sgt. Leandro Jasso, an Army Ranger who was shot dead in the southwestern province of Nimroz, apparently the victim of “friendly fire” from an Afghan soldier during a firefight with Al Qaeda elements. The Pentagon issued a statement insisting that “There were no indications he was shot intentionally.”

The two incidents bring the total number of US troops killed this year to 13, many of them victims of “insider” attacks.

They are symptomatic of the continuing deterioration of the US position in Afghanistan. After 17 years of unending war that have claimed the lives of tens if not hundreds of thousands of Afghans, killed nearly 2,400 US troops and cost Washington as much as \$2 trillion, the US-backed puppet regime in Kabul has lost control of at least half of the country and is being contested for control over at least 70 percent of Afghan territory.

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Ghazni, where the three American soldiers died on Tuesday, was the scene of major fighting in August after the Taliban overran the province's capital of the same name, threatening to cut off Kabul from southern Afghanistan. While US and Afghan forces, backed by heavy bombardments by US warplanes, succeeded in retaking the capital, the Taliban has maintained strongholds throughout the province.

Insurgents have continued to operate within the city and, on November 21, they fired a rocket into the center of Ghazni while Gen. Austin Scott Miller, the US military commander in Afghanistan, was visiting the city. Miller was photographed during the visit with a loaded M-4 assault rifle, a highly unusual weapon to be carried by a four-star general. Last month, Miller found himself in the middle of an "insider" firefight that erupted inside an Afghan military compound in Kandahar, when an Afghan soldier opened fire killing two senior Afghan security officials and wounding the province's governor.

Lack of control by US-backed forces over Ghazni forced the postponement until next year of parliamentary elections held in the rest of the country's 34 provinces in October.

The southwestern province of Nimroz, where the Army Ranger was killed earlier, had previously seen no presence of Al Qaeda.

The corrupt and incompetent puppet government the US is attempting to prop up with close to 15,000 troops on the ground and massive air power is widely described as ruling not over Afghanistan, but rather over "Kabulstan," and even its grip on the Afghan capital is often tenuous.

President Donald Trump's escalation of US troop numbers and lifting of restrictions on US air strikes announced in August of last year has at best created a military stalemate in Afghanistan, but at the cost of a staggering increase in the civilian death toll.

According to figures released last July by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 1,692 civilians were killed during the first six months of 2018. The death toll is the highest recorded by the UN over the last decade since it began keeping figures and is undoubtedly a serious underestimation of the real number killed. The most recent quarter saw a total of 2,467 civilians killed or wounded.

The soaring death toll has coincided with a sharp escalation of the US air war. The US Air Force is now flying double the number of sorties and dropping five times the number of bombs and missiles as in mid-2017. The dramatic escalation in air strikes is being carried out in response to mounting reversals on the ground.

Afghan security forces are continuing to suffer casualty rates that previous US commanders have described as "unsustainable." While the numbers are so discrediting of

the US war effort that they have become classified in Washington, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani recently stated that since 2015, nearly 29,000 have been killed. Given previous government estimates of 5,000 killed in 2015 and 7,000 in 2016, this would mean that since the beginning of 2017 nearly 17,000 have died, with at least 25 Afghan soldiers, on average, being killed every day.

The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), whose reports previously included estimates of Afghan casualties but which is now denied the numbers by the Pentagon, stated in the most recent report that “From the period of May 1 to the most current data as of October 1, 2018, the average number of casualties the (Afghan forces) suffered is the greatest it has ever been during like periods.”

Echoing the pessimism expressed in the SIGAR report, the chairman of the US Joint Chief of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, stated at the Halifax International Security Forum earlier this month that the Taliban “are not losing.” He added, “We’re a long way from where we could say that we’re on the right path” toward a resolution of the Afghan war.

This “path” is supposedly aimed at utilizing US military might to force the Taliban to the negotiating table to achieve a peaceful settlement with the Afghan puppet regime.

Trump appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as special US envoy to Afghanistan for the purpose of brokering a peace deal with the Taliban. Khalilzad was a longtime protégé of former US Vice President Dick Cheney and a member of the Project for a New American Century, which advocated US imperialist war against Iraq and in the broader Middle East. Washington’s ambassador to Afghanistan in the wake of the October 2001 US invasion, he was dubbed the American “viceroy” because of his blatant manipulation of Afghan politics to ensure the elevation to the country’s presidency of the preferred US puppet, Hamid Karzai.

Khalilzad has previous experience negotiating with the Taliban, having dealt with the Islamist movement when it constituted the government of Afghanistan and when he was employed as an advisor to the oil giant Unocal, which was seeking a deal to run a natural gas pipeline across the country from the Caspian Basin to Pakistan.

Khalilzad reportedly met recently for three days of talks with the Taliban and is attempting to establish a peace process with the aid of Saudi Arabia and the other reactionary oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. These efforts are being carried out in tandem—and in conflict—with negotiations that are being promoted by both Russia and China, with the support of Iran.

Last week, a five-member delegation from the Taliban attended an international conference in Moscow to discuss Afghan peace proposals. Also participating were representatives of the Afghan High Peace Council as well as officials from India, Iran, China and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Washington sent an observer delegation comprised of lower-level functionaries from the US embassy in Moscow.

Beijing, meanwhile, is also pursuing negotiations. A trilateral meeting between Pakistani, Chinese and Afghan foreign ministers is reportedly being prepared in Kabul. Washington's attempt to cow Islamabad into submission through the cutoff of hundreds of millions of dollars in aid has led to a closer alignment of Pakistan with Beijing and Moscow, including in relation to Afghanistan.

Washington has no intention of allowing its regional rivals to broker a peace deal at the expense of US imperialist interests in the region. While launched in the name of a "war against terrorism," the US intervention in Afghanistan has always been directed at achieving key geostrategic interests, including establishing a US military presence in Central Asia, which includes the vast energy resources of the Caspian Basin. The US occupation of Afghanistan also placed the US military within striking distance of Iran to the east, China to the west and Russia to the north.

The central demand of the Taliban is for the withdrawal of all US and allied troops from Afghanistan, something that Washington clearly opposes. The dueling peace processes over Afghanistan reflect the broader geopolitical and strategic rivalries between US imperialism, China, Russia and Iran, which threaten to erupt into global war.