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Afghan regime hit by wave of Taliban attacks

By Patrick Martin

1 December 2014

Taliban insurgents have launched an offensive against the US-backed regime in Afghanistan, invading a major military base in Helmand province in the south, hitting targets in the south, east and north of the country, and staging attacks in several parts of Kabul, the capital city.

The wave of attacks appears, at least in part, to be timed to the decision Thursday by the Afghan parliament to ratify a Status of Forces Agreement that will give foreign soldiers immunity from prosecution for war crimes for as long as the US-NATO forces remain.

While a handful of suicide attacks on targets in Kabul drew most of the attention in the American and European media, advances in Helmand province are likely the most significant gain by the Islamic fundamentalist movement. The province has long been one of the most fiercely contested, first between Taliban fighters and British troops, more recently with US Marines playing the main role.

On October 26 the British and American forces handed over their bases in Helmand to the Afghan Army, including Camp Bastion, targeted by the Taliban in this week's offensive. Taliban fighters also attacked Camp Shorabak, the Afghan portion of the same base complex, which is northwest of the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah.

Several dozen Taliban fighters equipped with automatic weapons and suicide vests began the attack in Helmand Thursday, but they were joined by more insurgents, and the fighting still flared intermittently through the weekend.

There were other Taliban attacks, spearheaded by suicide bombers, against the headquarters of the paramilitary Civil Order Police in Nowi Zad district, further north, and against Afghan Army facilities in Sangin district, also in the north of Helmand, where an explosion killed at least 14 soldiers.

The attacks on Camp Bastion are important both politically and militarily. Helmand province was the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting in the war, and at one point Camp Bastion was the fifth busiest British airport, trailing only Manchester and the three airports around London.

The huge base, the size of a major city, is a parking lot for military equipment and vehicles turned over to the Afghan Army. If captured by the Taliban, it could play the same role as Mosul, Iraq's second city, where the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria seized enough abandoned US military equipment to become a significant mechanized force.

In Kabul, Taliban gunmen attacked the office of a small NGO in the western neighborhood of Karte She on Saturday, killing three South African citizens, an aid worker and his two children, and an Afghan citizen, in what a Taliban spokesman described as a "center of intelligence and preaching of Christianity." All three gunmen were subsequently killed by Afghan security forces.

Two days before, a Taliban suicide squad attacked a foreign guesthouse in the diplomatic quarter but was driven off by guards, and a suicide bomber destroyed a British embassy vehicle, killing six people. Another suicide attacker tried to storm the city's police headquarters and killed one high-ranking official.

Last Monday, two American soldiers were killed when a bicycle bomb exploded as their convoy drove by. Both men were working with NATO forces in Kabul.

The Taliban attacks in Kabul were isolated events that did not threaten US-NATO control of the capital city. But they compounded the insecurity in the capital city, which has been hit by a dozen such small-scale suicide attacks in recent weeks. In response to the Taliban campaign, the city's police chief General Zahir Zahir resigned Sunday.

Other incidents took place in the eastern province of Nangarhar, where a bomb placed in a mosque wounded 21 people during Friday prayer services, and another bomb hit a produce market in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif, wounding four.

The escalating bloodshed comes amid Washington's efforts to consolidate military and financial support for the newly installed Afghan stooge regime, headed by President Ashraf Ghani, a former World Bank official, and Abdullah Abdullah, a former Afghan foreign minister.

The Afghan parliament ratified a bilateral security agreement with the US and a Status of Forces Agreement with NATO on Thursday, giving legal authorization to the continued occupation of

Afghanistan by US-NATO forces after December 31. The treaties include provisions ensuring that US and NATO soldiers cannot be tried in Afghan courts for atrocities committed against Afghan civilians, one of the key demands of the Pentagon.

Ghani and Abdullah were to travel to Brussels, Belgium on Monday for NATO meetings and then to a conference in London on Wednesday with “donor” countries—i.e., their paymasters among the imperialist powers that supply the money to keep the Afghan government and military running.

Meanwhile, Reuters News Agency reported that the Obama administration was planning to raise the number of US troops in Afghanistan in 2015 above the level of 9,800 previously set by the president last May. Washington will provide anywhere from a few hundred to 1,000 more troops to make up for a shortfall in the number supplied by NATO member countries, where the Afghanistan deployment is widely unpopular.