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US casualties up as debate over withdrawing troops intensifies

By Yochi J. Dreazen

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American battlefield casualties in Afghanistan have spiked in recent weeks, offering a grim backdrop to the Obama administration's intensifying debate about how many U.S. troops should begin returning home next month.

Twenty-three U.S. troops have been killed in Afghanistan in the first two weeks of June alone, part of a recent pattern in which the monthly American death toll there has been exceeding last year's record-high levels. Fifty-six U.S. troops died in May, for instance, compared to 51 the year before, while 51 other troops lost their lives in April compared to 34 in the comparable period of 2010.

The war is also becoming significantly bloodier for noncombatants. On Saturday, the United Nations said that last month was the deadliest of the war for Afghan civilians, with 368 killed in May alone. The U.N. said 82 percent of the civilians were killed by the Taliban and other Islamist fighters, with 12 percent dying at the hands of NATO forces--whose continued

accidental killing of civilians is a major cause of public anger within Afghanistan--and the remainder impossible to classify.

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With Afghanistan's traditional summer fighting season just getting under way, senior American commanders worry that 2011 will ultimately be a deadlier year than 2010, which was the worst to date for the American-led war effort. So far this year, 239 troops—including 168 Americans—have been killed in Afghanistan. In 2010, 711 troops died there, including 499 Americans.

The rising U.S. death toll has set off alarm bells within the American high command in Kabul, which is desperate to show that its strategy is working, and the White House, where senior administration officials will soon make a decision about how many of the 30,000 "surge" troops should begin withdrawing in July.

It is particularly alarming to many Pentagon officials because senior U.S. military commanders had expected a high death toll in Afghanistan in 2010—when the surge troops were fighting their way into Taliban-held areas of Kandahar and Helmand provinces—but believed that casualties would start to decline this year as NATO and Afghan forces expanded their control over the former insurgent strongholds.

Instead, U.S. and NATO casualties are continuing to climb, in large part because militants are making ever more effective use of "improvised explosive devices," or IEDs. The percentage of Western military fatalities caused by the roadside bombs is up from last year and hovering near an all-time high. In 2010, 58 percent of the NATO casualties came from IEDs, according to icasualties.org, which tracks the figures. This year, the figure has risen to more than 60 percent.

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The U.S. losses stand at odds with the relatively optimistic assessments of the war which have been offered recently by outgoing Defense Secretary Robert Gates and his designated successor, CIA Director Leon Panetta. At a confirmation hearing last week, Panetta told a Senate panel that

the U.S. had "made progress with regards to security in that country, albeit fragile and reversible."

This is a critical moment for the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, which is steadily losing public support within both the U.S. and many troop-contributing nations. A CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll last week found that support for the war here at home has fallen to just 36 percent, the lowest level of the year, while 74 percent of Americans want to see the U.S. withdraw all or some of its troops, a 10 percent percent increase from last month. Many NATO countries, meanwhile, have announced plans to bring their forces home later this year.

Military officials and outside analysts are divided about the current state of the war effort, which has been raging since late 2001 and is already the longest overseas conflict in American history.

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Optimists, including many administration officials, argue that American-led forces have evicted the Taliban from many of their former strongholds in southern Afghanistan and killed so many militants that insurgents may soon be ready to negotiate a peace deal.

But critics of the current approach point out that insurgent violence continues to rage at record levels throughout much of the country while militants—despite the recent killing of al-Qaida mastermind Osama bin Laden—have not yet shown any real willingness to start substantive talks.

Seth Jones, an Afghanistan expert at the RAND Corp. who has advised the U.S. military command there, said he believes the current American approach to the war is beginning to show some results. In an interview, Jones said areas of southern Afghanistan which had been once under exclusive Taliban control are now up for grabs, with U.S. forces fighting hard to prevent the militants from returning.

"These levels of violence are indicative of a shift from regions of Afghanistan being under Taliban control to being contested by the two sides, which is an improvement of sorts," he said. "It indicates that the strategy is working in undermining Taliban control, but what is not clear is whether those gains will endure."

Afghanistan has long been a shadowy, murky conflict, making it difficult for senior officials to get an accurate read of the current state of the war. But with the White House facing a self-imposed July deadline for beginning to withdraw some U.S. troops, critical decisions—even if based on uncertain information—will need to be made in coming weeks all the same.