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Despite Troop Surge, Taliban Attacks and US Casualties Soared

By Gareth Porter

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Data on attacks by armed opposition forces and U.S. combat casualties since the U.S. troop surge in Afghanistan was completed last summer provide clear evidence that the surge and the increase in targeted killings by Special Operations Forces have failed to break the momentum of the Taliban.

The Taliban and allied insurgent organizations launched 54 percent more attacks and killed or wounded 56 percent more U.S. troops over the nine months from last October through May than in the comparable period a year earlier, according to data collected by the U.S. Department of Defense and the highly respected Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO).

The nearly 1,571 attacks in May [recorded by ANSO](#), which exceeded the previous monthly peak total of 1,541 attacks in September 2010, was achieved four months earlier in the fighting season than the previous peak.

The number of attacks in June was two percent less than in May, [according to the latest ANSO report](#) published on the organization's Web site Sunday.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said last June that U.S.-NATO forces would have to demonstrate "progress" by the end of calendar year 2010 or face a collapse in public support.

But the Taliban responded to the surge with a carefully planned strategy to maintain much higher levels of offensive operations through the period from October through December, which normally drop off from the high point of the offensive. The war plan for 2011 was aimed at pushing the level of attacks to new highs earlier in the year than ever before.

Even as the monthly level of Taliban attacks was going down in the last quarter of 2010, the number of Taliban IEDs planted and direct or indirect fire attacks during the quarter was 130 percent higher than in the same period of 2009, as shown in a graph in the [April 2011 DOD report](#) on Afghanistan.

That increase in attacks recorded by the Pentagon relative to the previous year matches almost exactly the increase of 132 percent in U.S. casualties in Afghanistan in the fourth quarter relative to the same period in 2009, according to casualty data provided to IPS by the Pentagon's Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO).

The JIEDDO data show the number of U.S. troops killed in action increased by 56 percent from 80 in the last quarter of 2009 to 125 in the same period of 2010.

But the little-noticed number of U.S. troops wounded in action was 1,446 in the final quarter — a 140-percent increase over the 601 wounded in the comparable period of 2009.

Virtually all of the 33,000 additional U.S. troops announced by President Barack Obama in December 2009 had arrived by the beginning of September 2010, so that the major increases in Taliban attacks and U.S. casualties relative to the previous year came after the U.S. and NATO were deploying their peak level of combat capacity.

Both DOD and ANSO data show that major increases in Taliban attacks and U.S. casualties continued into the second quarter of 2011.

ANSO data show 2,740 attacks in the first quarter of 2011, 53 percent higher than the 1,791 attacks in the first quarter of 2010. DOD's April report shows roughly 5,060 attacks for the most recent first quarter, compared with 3,618 for the comparable period last year — a 40-percent increase.

ANSO data show just under 1,200 attacks in April and nearly 1,571 attacks in May — 43 percent more than the 1948 attacks in April and May of 2010.

The ANSO attack data include only those which are regarded as having a significant impact on security, thus excluding hundreds of unexploded IEDs and other incidents counted by DOD.

Last January, *The New York Times* blog "At War" called the ANSO reporting on insurgent attacks an "independent and widely respected barometer of the war." ANSO's reporting is supported by the European Commission, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

U.S. casualties during April and May totaled 958, compared with 750 a year ago, according to JIEDDO's data.

The total of 3,416 U.S. troops killed or wounded for the eight-month period since September 2010, according to JIEDDO data, represents a 54-percent increase over the casualties in the comparable period a year earlier.

No other NATO country releases monthly totals for wounded in action in Afghanistan, although the UK updates the cumulative total monthly. The Canadian military asserts that it does not want to give Taliban insurgents information on the effectiveness of its attacks.

The Pentagon asserted in its April 2011 report that in the previous six months, operations by U.S. and NATO troops as well as Afghan security forces had "broadly arrested the momentum of the insurgency in much of the country." But it cited only one concrete indicator of such a shift — a reduction in insurgent indirect fire attacks in the Regional Command East.

But indirect fire has never been more than a tiny fraction of insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, and a province-by-province breakdown of attack numbers in the [ANSO report on the first quarter](#) of 2011 shows that the Taliban had increased the total number of attacks in Khost, the pivotal province in the Eastern region during the quarter to 326, compared with just 147 during the comparable period of 2010.

Another key province in the Eastern region, Paktya, saw insurgent attacks of up to 124 in the quarter compared with only 14 the year before, and total attacks in both Paktika and Kunar were up 12 percent and 8 percent respectively over the previous year.

Gen. David Petraeus, who had remained silent on the data on the increase in Taliban attacks and U.S.-NATO casualties since last September, suggested to *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius last week that the surge was now beginning to pay off, because the level of violence in "recent weeks" was down 5 percent from a year ago.

That comment revealed that Petraeus has been desperately looking for even the slightest evidence that the pattern of annual increases in Taliban attacks was being broken.

But the short-term dip in the level of attacks he cited is scant reason for believing that the pattern has been broken. In previous years, two months in the late spring or earlier summer with little change in the level of attacks have been followed by one or more months with large increases over the previous month.

In fact, the post-surge Taliban operations have continued a pattern that has been consistent over the past five years: a gradual increase in the number of attacks from the low point at the end of the previous year's campaign in January or February to a high point in August or September, followed by a gradual decline in attacks from October to February.

The new low point is always significantly higher, however, than the year before.

This year, the level of attacks at the low point in February was 45 percent higher than the low point of 2010, which was in turn 38 percent higher than the one in 2009.

The Taliban leadership appears to have been making a point to Petraeus and the Pentagon: “The level of our offensive operations cannot be slowed by your military operations against us.” And as the U.S. and NATO troop level begins to ebb, the ability of the Taliban to mount even higher numbers of attacks can only continue to grow.