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Strategic Issues

## The operation, codenamed "Azada Wosa" or "Be Free"

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THE operation, codenamed "Azada Wosa" or "Be Free" in Pashtun, has great tactical importance for the occupation forces. The 2,300 troops of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which only arrived in Afghanistan seven weeks ago to reinforce the NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), were hurled last week into a major assault on insurgent strongholds near the town of Garmser in Helmand province. The guerillas in that area are mostly supporters of the Taliban Islamic fundamentalist movement, which was overthrown by the 2001 US invasion.

Garmser is believed to be one of the main assembly points for Taliban fighters moving from mountain bases along the Afghan-Pakistan border to link up with insurgent units across the rebellious ethnic Pashtun provinces of southern Afghanistan. It is also a key transit route for smuggling Afghan opium and heroin to Pakistan, one of the principal ways in which the insurgency finances itself. British troops, who are responsible for NATO operations in Helmand, have fought desperate battles to hold a base in the town, but have been unable to either control it or prevent Taliban movements.

According to Taliban sources cited on May 2 by Asia Times Online, the insurgents have offered only minimal resistance to the US operation. Their tactics is to bottle up hundreds of the newly arrived American troops trying to secure Garmser, while they concentrate on attacking occupation forces further north.

A series of other attacks have taken place that have pushed total US/NATO fatalities this year to 5621 American, 9 British, 9 Canadian and 17 from other countries that have troops taking part in the occupation.

Australian commando Jason Marks was killed and four others wounded by small arms fire in Uruzgan province on April 27 when Afghan fighters ambushed Australian troops as they assembled for an attack on an alleged Taliban position.

Air strikes had to be called in to disentangle the Australians. The same day, insurgents attacked an US/Afghan army base in the eastern province of Kunar, near the Pakistan border. They were driven off by artillery and air strikes.

On April 28, clashes between Taliban and US troops took place in Nimroz province and Ghazni province, with no reported American casualties. Another Australian soldier was wounded during a firefight in Uruzgan.

Two American troops were killed in separate incidents on April 29. Jonathan Yelner, a 24-year-old member of an Air Force maintenance unit, was killed by a roadside bomb planted outside the huge US airbase at Bagram, in central Afghanistan. Army sergeant David McDowell, 30, was killed by guerilla small arms fire near Camp Bastion, the main NATO base in northern Helmand province.

Also on April 29, a suicide bomber detonated explosives among members of a government opium poppy eradication team in the province of Nangarhar. Eighteen people were killed and at least 31 wounded.

On April 30, one Czech soldier was killed and four others wounded by a roadside bomb in Logar province. Czech forces only assumed command over ISAF's "Provincial Reconstruction Team" in Logar on March 28.

A Fijian-born British soldier, Ratu Babakobau, was critically wounded on May 2 when his vehicle struck a mine in northern Helmand. He was declared dead on arrival at the Camp Bastion hospital. Three other British troops and one Afghan were wounded.

On May 5, a civilian helicopter contracted by the US military was hit by small arms fire in Kunar province and forced to make an emergency landing. There were no reported casualties. Yesterday, one Canadian soldier was killed and another wounded during a clash with insurgents in Kandahar province.

In almost every engagement with Afghan guerillas, the US and ISAF forces rely on air support from helicopter gunships or fighter-bombers to avoid casualties. Attacks on alleged Taliban targets are also overwhelmingly carried out by aircraft.

As many as 10 air attacks are carried out every day in Afghanistan. Often, civilians are killed or maimed by these indiscriminate bombings, fuelling hatred for the occupation and creating fresh recruits for the insurgency.

The dependency on air power underscores the fragility of the US/NATO hold on Afghanistan. Some 64,000 foreign troops are trying to occupy a country the same size as Iraq but which has a far more rugged terrain and a largely rural population.

The US-funded and equipped Afghan National Army consists of less than 70,000 personnel and has no independent air support or logistic systems.

By comparison, the failed Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s involved 108,000 troops at its peak, with over 300,000 pro-Moscow Afghan government troops and police.

Like the Soviet forces, the far smaller US-led occupation only controls the main cities and selected strategic positions. The Taliban and other insurgent groups are able to operate largely unhindered across large parts of the countryside.

The insurgents are also backed by divisions within the NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force, which has responsibility for security in all the country except the eastern provinces, where some 14,000 US troops operate independently of NATO.

ISAF is made up of roughly 50,000 troops from 40 different countries, with many national contingents consisting of only a few hundred personnel.

The inevitable command and logistical difficulties arising from its diverse composition are compounded by various national cautions placed on the use of troops.

More than a third of the ISAF personnel, including the large contingents of German, French, Italian, Spanish and Turkish troops, are not allowed to deploy into southern Afghanistan, where the insurgency is most active. American, Canadian, British, Dutch and Australian troops are bearing the brunt of the fighting.

Demands by the US, British and Canadian governments, the major European powers both lift these limits and send extra troops to Afghanistan and this have been largely ignored.

In the wake of the NATO summit in Bucharest during April, France announced extra 700 troops for the eastern provinces to free up US forces to fight in the south. Georgia, which is seeking NATO membership, has promised to send 500 troops.

Small numbers of troops are being sent by Croatia, Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania. The Bush administration ordered an extra 3,500 US marines to Afghanistan in January. The total reinforcements, however, fall far short of the 7,000 to 8,000 extra troops that NATO commanders declared that they urgently needed at the beginning of the year.

The US attempt to quash the Afghan people and turn the country into a pliable client state in Central Asia has dragged on now for over six-and-a-half years. So far, it has cost the lives of more than 800 American and NATO troops and tens of thousands of Afghans.

The estimated financial cost of the occupation was over \$120 billion at the end of 2007. However, little aid has been provided to end the appalling social conditions facing most of the population.

The New York Times reported the Bush administration is considering ordering an additional 7,000 US soldiers to Afghanistan in 2009 because of "growing resignation that NATO is unable or unwilling to contribute more troops".

Such a deployment would move American troop numbers in Afghanistan to over 40,000 and further step up the death and destruction.

The war has no end in sight. The unstated position in Washington one shared by both Republicans and Democrats is that tens of thousands of American troops will be killing and dying in Afghanistan for the next decade or more.

**The author is a Columnist and Researcher.**