



Written by on July 2, 2009

Marines Launch Major Offensive in Afghanistan

The offensive has been named Operation Khanjar, which translates as "Strike of the Sword."

The British *Guardian* newspaper reported that "waves of helicopters landed marines in the valley" and " disembarked and fanned out into the fields as the sun rose. Hundreds more arrived in convoys through a barren area known as the desert of death."

"Where we go we will stay, and where we stay, we will hold, build and work toward transition of all security responsibilities to Afghan forces," Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, commander of the Marines in southern Afghanistan, told the newspaper. General Nicholson was also quoted by Reuters, saying: "The intent is to go big, go strong and go fast, and by doing so we are going to save lives on both sides."



The *Guardian* observed that the outcome of the military operation will likely impact the fate of Afghan's incumbent President Hamid Karzai, who is seeking votes from fellow Pashtun tribesmen in southern Afghanistan.

As BBC news explains, leaders of the U.S.-Afghan alliance hope that if U.S. and other NATO forces are viewed as decisively winning the military battle against the Taliban, "middle and lower-ranking Taliban leaders and fighters are more likely to defect back to the Afghan government's side, with American and British sources in Kabul convinced that the US troop surge is already unsettling the Taliban leadership."

BBC also quoted U.S. commanders that expressed hope that this offensive will help turn the tide against the Taliban. Military sources said the aim of this major operation is to "clear, hold and build" in areas under Taliban influence prior to Afghanistan's presidential elections on August 20.

Reuters news quoted Marine Lieutenant-Colonel Christian Cabaniss, who told his troops before their armored convoys began their offensive: "We're going to seize the population from the Taliban and never let them go."

Reuters' agency in Pakistan received a statement from Mullah Hayat Khan, a senior Afghan Taliban commander, who claimed: "Thousands of Taliban mujahideen are ready to fight against US troops in the operation in Helmand province."

There are 10,000 Marines in Helmand Province, 8,500 of whom arrived in the past two months. They constitute form the largest single force of troop escalation ordered by President Obama.

AP noted a report from Pakistan's army stating that it had moved troops from another location on its border with Afghanistan to Balochistan province — the region opposite Helmand, so it will be in position to stop any Taliban militants trying to flee the offensive by crossing into Pakistan. Many



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domestic and international observers have criticized Pakistan's prior efforts to secure the border.

As the Marine offensive in Helmand continued, U.S. military spokesmen said on July 2 that a soldier had been kidnapped in southeastern Afghanistan. The kidnapping took place in Paktia province, well east of Helmand, and was unrelated to the operation.

The *Washington Post* quoted a statement issued from U.S. military headquarters in Kabul, that said: "We are exhausting all available resources to ascertain his whereabouts and provide for his safe return."

The *Post* said military officials in Afghanistan, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the incident, said the missing soldier "appears to have walked off his base into an unsecured area."

The U.S. official in Afghanistan said the soldier's absence was discovered when he did not show up for morning formation and that it is very unusual for a U.S. soldier to leave a military base unaccompanied by other U.S. troops.

Agence-France Press reported that a commander of the Taliban's militant Haqqani faction, identified only as Bahram, had claimed on July 2 that his militia had captured the soldier in the Yousuf Khail district of Paktika province.

"Our leaders have not decided on the fate of this soldier." Said Bahram. "They will decide on his fate and soon we will present video tapes of the coalition soldier and our demand to media."

AFP could not independently confirm the statement.

Operation Khanjar is the first major military operation in Afghanistan since President Obama announced a buildup of forces there in March. About the same time, Obama dismissed General David McKiernan, and replaced him with General Stanley McChrystal, a former joint special operations command chief and a counter-insurgency expert. McChrystal assumed his current assignment on June 15.

McChrystal's forces were credited with tracking down and killing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the head of al-Qaida in Iraq. According to official statements, he was brought in to provide "fresh eyes" and "fresh thinking" to the war in Afghanistan.

In some ways, Operation Khanjar is an example of how U.S. military operations in Afghanistan should have been conducted — almost eight years ago. The Taliban government that ruled the nation in 2001 had provided a sanctuary for Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist organization, and, therefore, were culpable partners in the terrorist attacks of September 11. The Constitution charges the federal government with protecting the states against invasion and the attacks of 9-11 certainly qualified as an invasion.

The problem with our government's response to the invasion is *how* it was initiated and *how* it was subsequently conducted. While our Constitution gives only Congress the power to declare war, President Bush did not ask for such a declaration, but instead obtained the approval of the UN and its regional affiliate, NATO. The North Atlantic Council invoked Article V of the NATO charter, describing the 9-11 attacks as being against the entire alliance. The UN Security Council then passed Resolution 1373, a measure drafted by the Bush administration's UN representative to authorize the "war on terrorism."

Thought the coalition of U.S., NATO, and Afghan Northern Alliance troops managed to drive the Taliban



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from the seat of power in Kabul, the Taliban dug in in outlying regions of the country, where they remain today. And though the primary stated objective of the war on Afghanistan was to capture Osama bin Laden, when bin Laden and his chief lieutenant, Mullah Omar, eluded capture, the coalition declared victory because the Northern Alliance had supplanted the Taliban. As in other wars managed and coordinated by the UN and its subsidiary agencies, the "coalition" idea of victory is often not the same as the U.S. idea of victory.

Furthermore, while the Taliban have had years to consolidate their control and Osama bin Laden remains at large, the United States has wasted six years, over 4,000 lives, and billions of dollars in another undeclared, and even more senseless, war in Iraq. And, as usual, when U.S. forces invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003, the action was "authorized" by Security Council resolutions 678 and 687, not a congressional declaration of war.

The present winding down of U.S. troops in Iraq and the simultaneous buildup of troops in Afghanistan is a more serious attempt to dismantle the Taliban and is a small step in the direction of what needed to be done in late 2001 and early 2002.

However, the action is not only a case of too little, too late, but it still lacks a congressional declaration of war and still enmeshes U.S. troops in a UN/NATO-related coalition that does not have the sole interests of our nation as its paramount objective.

When will we ever learn?

Photos: AP Images



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