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Security in Afghanistan Is Deteriorating, Aid Groups Say

By **ROD NORDLAND**

KABUL, Afghanistan — Even as more American troops flow into the country, **Afghanistan** is more dangerous than it has ever been during this war, with security deteriorating in recent months, according to international organizations and humanitarian groups.

Large parts of the country that were once completely safe, like most of the northern provinces, now have a substantial **Taliban** presence — even in areas where there are few Pashtuns, who previously were the Taliban's only supporters. As **NATO** forces poured in and shifted to the south to battle the Taliban in their stronghold, the Taliban responded with a surge of their own, greatly increasing their activities in the north and parts of the east.

The worsening security comes as the Obama administration is under increasing pressure to show results to maintain public support for the war, and raises serious concerns about whether the country can hold legitimate nationwide elections for Parliament next Saturday.

Unarmed government employees can no longer travel safely in 30 percent of the country's 368 districts, according to published **United Nations** estimates, and there are districts deemed too dangerous to visit in all but one of the country's 34 provinces.

The number of insurgent attacks has increased significantly; in August 2009, insurgents carried out 630 attacks. This August, they initiated at least 1,353, according to the **Afghan N.G.O. Safety Office**, an independent organization financed by Western governments and agencies to monitor safety for aid workers.

An attack on a Western medical team in northern Afghanistan in early August, which killed 10 people, was the largest massacre in years of aid workers in Afghanistan.

"The humanitarian space is shrinking day by day," said a **CARE** Afghanistan official, Abdul Kebar.

The International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, does not routinely release detailed data on attacks around the country, and the Afghan government stopped doing so in mid-2009. United Nations officials have also stopped releasing details of attacks, though they monitor them closely. Requests for access to that information were denied.

ISAF officials dispute the notion that security is slipping from them, pointing to their successes with **targeted killings** and captures of Taliban field commanders and members of the Taliban shadow government.

American military officials say the increased level of violence is related to the rise in the number of its forces here. The last 2,000 of 30,000 new American troops are expected to arrive in the next week or two, military officials say. The result is more military operations, they say, and more opportunities for the insurgents to attack coalition forces.

That does not entirely explain the increased activity of the Taliban in areas where they were seldom seen before, and where the coalition presence is light, however.

Last year, American military leaders adopted a strategy of concentrating operations in what they identified as 80 “key terrain districts,” mostly in the south and east of the country, less than a fourth of Afghanistan’s districts.

The idea was to attack the Taliban where they were strongest, and concentrate forces where populations were largest.

While how many fighters the insurgents have is a matter of estimate and conjecture, the impact they have had is easy enough to judge.

Last month, ISAF recorded 4,919 “kinetic events,” including small-arms fire, bombs and shelling, a 7 percent increase over the previous month, and a 49 percent increase over August 2009, according to Maj. Sunset R. Belinsky, an ISAF spokeswoman. August 2009 was itself an unusually active month for the insurgency as it sought to disrupt the presidential elections then.

With one attack after another, the Taliban and their insurgent allies have degraded security in almost every part of the country (the one exception is Panjshir Province in the north, which has never succumbed to Taliban control).

The Afghan N.G.O. Safety Office says that by almost every metric it has, Afghanistan is more dangerous now than at any time since 2001.

The most recent troop buildup comes in response to steady advances by the Taliban. Four years ago, the insurgents were active in only four provinces. Now they are active in 33 of 34, the organizations say.

“We do not support the perspective that this constitutes ‘things getting worse before they get better,’ ” said Nic Lee, director of the Afghan N.G.O. Safety Office, “but rather see it as being consistent with the five-year trend of things just getting worse.”

Despite the spread of the conflict, humanitarian organizations say they are still able to serve Afghans in much of the country. They have to be much more careful, restricting their movements and pulling back from some areas altogether.

They use Afghan workers rather than international staff members. They avoid travel by road and take greater security precautions. They have also taken to operating incognito as a matter of routine. As a result, while insurgent attacks have more than doubled since last year, attacks on N.G.O.’s have actually declined by 35 percent, Mr. Lee said.

Because of the lack of security, CARE, like many humanitarian groups, no longer uses the country’s principal highway, the Grand Trunk Road connecting Kabul, the capital, to Peshawar in Pakistan. CARE has 10 offices around the country to manage its 1,000 employees, but its own international staff members can safely visit only four or five of them, according to a spokeswoman, Jennifer Rowell.

Likewise, there is no longer an Oxfam sign on display in the entire country, although the British-based aid group finances projects in scores of villages, mostly staffed by Afghans.

“Most N.G.O.’s don’t send foreigners to most places any longer,” said Ashley Jackson, head of policy and advocacy for Oxfam in Kabul, referring to nongovernmental organizations. Like many major aid groups, Oxfam now subcontracts much of its work in the provinces to partners, usually Afghan aid groups.

The threat to government workers is just as severe. Last month, Afghan police and army officials asked the [Independent Election Commission](#) to cancel 938 of its proposed 6,835 polling centers, almost 14 percent, because it could not guarantee security for those areas. Polling places in 25 provinces were affected.

On Tuesday the election commission said it would cancel 81 other polling sites, nearly a fifth of the polling places in eastern Nangarhar Province, which was relatively safe during last year’s presidential election. The commission has warned that it may have to close still more

polling centers in other provinces if the authorities cannot provide adequate security for voters.

Only 500 international observers are coming to monitor these elections, compared with more than a thousand last year, according to Jindad Spinghar of the Free and Fair Election Foundation. International observers will be able to go only to provincial capitals, not rural areas, where most of the population lives, he said. The election foundation, the leading Afghan monitoring group, has had to cut back its own observers, who will be watching only 60 percent of polling places.

“Because the control of the central government is decreasing,” Mr. Spinghar said, “power brokers and warlords will be able to use their influence at the local level, where there are no observers.” It was in just such areas in 2009 that widespread voting fraud took place, resulting in a disputed and internationally discredited presidential election.

Military officials counter that they are making headway against the Taliban. Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), the ISAF commander, said recently that NATO forces had [killed or captured 2,974 insurgents](#) this summer, 235 of them commanders. Last December, the military assessed Taliban strength at 25,000.

“While we do not routinely release data on total attacks around the country, we did expect the number of attacks to go up as the number of ISAF troops increased,” said Major Belinsky, the ISAF spokeswoman.

“We are pushing into areas where the Taliban have enjoyed safe haven in the past, and we are taking that away from them,” Major Belinsky said. “They are putting up a tough fight, with more tough fighting to come, but we are making progress.”

A top coalition general bristled recently when asked about views among some critics that NATO was losing the fight. “How do they know we’re losing? I can lay out rhyme and reason about where we’re making progress. We’re building, they’re destroying. I say to them, prove it.”