

Burden of war in Afghanistan shifts even more to the U.S.



U.S. troops now account for about two-thirds of the NATO force in Afghanistan, and Americans make up more than two-thirds of July's Western military fatalities.

By Laura King, Los Angeles Times

August 1, 2010

Reporting from Forward Operating Base Kunduz,

The platoon sergeant was inspecting the gaping crater left by a roadside bomb in northern Afghanistan when a second thunderous blast went off just 20 feet away.

A choking dust cloud enveloped him. He had no feeling in his left leg. When the soldiers who rushed to his rescue shouted questions at him, he couldn't hear them.

"I'm lucky to be alive," he said Saturday, two days after the explosion. Requesting that his name and hometown not be mentioned to protect his family's privacy, he spoke at the military hospital where he was being closely monitored for signs of traumatic brain injury.

For American troops, July was the deadliest month of the nearly 9-year-old war in Afghanistan. At least 66 U.S. service members were killed, surpassing what had been a record 60 American fatalities in the previous month.

The means of death were as varied as the hazards of war: helicopter crashes, firefights, ambushes, sniper fire and, especially, the kind of homemade bombs that nearly claimed the

33-year-old sergeant.

But the pattern of combat deaths in July pointed up an overarching truth that is likely to endure as the conflict grinds onward: More and more each day, this is an American war.

With their numbers approaching 100,000 as a consequence of the troop buildup ordered by President Obama in December, U.S. troops now comprise about two-thirds of the NATO force in Afghanistan. And American deaths are commensurate with that dominance, accounting for more than two-thirds of Western military fatalities in July, according to figures provided by icasualties.com, an independent website.

With North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies distancing themselves from the notion of an open-ended stay in Afghanistan, the American aspect of the war comes increasingly to the fore.

In the United States, the rapidly rising combat toll in Afghanistan is feeding congressional doubts about the war's aims. But such qualms are rarely heard in the ranks, particularly in units that have arrived in the last six months as part of the buildup.

"You know it's a possibility, getting killed; but honestly, I don't think we think about it as much as the public does," said Capt. Alain Etienne, a 33-year-old from Brooklyn with the 10th Mountain Division's 1st Infantry Brigade in the northern province of Kunduz. "You do your job."

Although most of the arriving U.S. troops are being deployed in the south, the spiritual home of the Taliban and the scene of near-constant fighting between NATO forces and insurgents, American forces are also pushing into parts of the country where they have never been present in large numbers.

That includes a wide swath of Afghanistan's north, where until just a few months ago German troops made up the bulk of foreign forces.

The north was once considered a quiet corner of Afghanistan. But Taliban fighters have ensconced themselves in Kunduz and another strategic province, Baghlan, a threat that commanders are seeking to quell with the deployment of about 3,000 troops with the 10th Mountain Division.

A morning battle briefing Saturday at Forward Operating Base Kunduz, just outside the provincial capital, reflected a quickening tempo of hostilities: a suspected sighting of the Taliban "shadow governor"; small-arms fire aimed at a German aircraft; three mine-resistant vehicles knocked out of commission in 15 hours by improvised bombs; rockets fired into Kunduz city, though they did not explode.

In the base's windowless tactical operations center, with the glow of computer screens providing almost the only light, the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Russell Lewis, fired questions: Can we speed up the outfitting of ground-penetrating radar? How long will it take to repair the damaged mine-detection vehicles?

The U.S. commanders described the German force as a reliable partner in the fight, though both NATO and Afghan officials have conceded that the security situation in the north has

deteriorated sharply in the last 12 months.

But Germany, like other NATO allies, is paying heed to unmistakable antiwar sentiment at home, putting further pressure on U.S. forces. Canada has announced plans to bring its troops home from Afghanistan in 2011. Britain handed over a particularly dangerous district of Helmand province to American control.

And the 1,600-member contingent from the Netherlands, based mainly in the province of Oruzgan, heads home this week, a development greeted with satisfaction by the Taliban. Spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid congratulated the Dutch for what he called a wise decision.

With greater overall visibility than other national contingents, the United States and its forces often become a lightning rod for Afghan resentment over civilian suffering, even if American troops are not involved in a particular incident.

Angry anti-U.S. protests broke out Friday in Kabul, the capital, after a vehicle driven by American contractors with DynCorp International was involved in a traffic accident that killed at least four Afghans, police said.

In the north, the Americans are sometimes welcomed, but with a distinct undercurrent that the people believe the fight could go either way.

A week ago, troops based in Kunduz went on patrol in the district of Aliabad, fanning out in a village they were visiting for the first time. Trailed by a gaggle of giggling children, they spent two hours walking dusty lanes, meeting with the most important village elder, asking residents what kind of help they needed: wells dug, or seed for crops.

But the Afghan commander of a police checkpoint at the village's entrance sounded a note of caution.

"The Taliban are right over there, just across the river," he said pointing with his chin toward a line of trees a few hundred yards away.

"We are five police in this checkpoint, and they are 50. They have enough munitions, but we do not. And if they want to come, they will."