Extract of www.acdn.net

https://www.acdn.net/spip/spip.php?article340

US Air Strikes

- Homepage - News - External sources -

Publication date: Tuesday 11 September 2007

Copyright © www.acdn.net - All rights reserved

Usual bombings, and another possible one.

Death at a Distance: The US Air War

by Conn Hallinan

Published on Friday, August 31, 2007 by Foreign Policy In Focus

According to the residents of Datta Khel, a town in Pakistan's North Waziristan, three missiles streaked out of Afghanistan's Pakitka Province and slammed into a Madrassa, or Islamic school, this past June. When the smoke cleared, the Asia Times reported, 30 people were dead.

The killers were robots, General Atomics MQ-1 Predators. The AGM-114 Hellfire missiles they used in the attack were directed from a base deep in the southern Nevada desert.

It was not the first time Predators had struck. The previous year a CIA Predator took a shot at al-Qaeda's number two man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, but missed. The missile, however, killed 18 people. According to the Asia Times piece, at least one other suspected al-Qaeda member was assassinated by a Predator in Pakistan's northern frontier area, and in 2002 a Predator killed six "suspected al-Qaeda" members in Yemen.

These assaults are part of what may be the best kept secret of the Iraq-Afghanistan conflicts: an enormous intensification of US bombardments in these and other countries in the region, the increasing number of civilian casualties such a strategy entails, and the growing role of pilot less killers in the conflict.

According to Associated Press, there has been a five-fold increase in the number of bombs dropped on Iraq during the first six months of 2007 over the same period in 2006. More than 30 tons of those have been cluster weapons, which take an especially heavy toll on civilians.

The U.S. Navy has added an aircraft carrier to its Persian Gulf force, and the Air Force has moved F-16s into Balad air base north of Baghdad.

Balad, which currently conducts 10,000 air operations a week, is strengthening runways to handle the increase in air activity. Col. David Reynolds told the AP, "We would like to get to be a field like Langley, if you will." The Langley field in Virginia is one of the Air Force's biggest and most sophisticated airfields.

The Air Force certainly appears to be settling in for a long war. "Until we can determine that the Iraqis have got their air force to significant capability," says Lt Gen. Gary North, the regional air commander, "I think the coalition will be here to support that effort."

The Iraqi air force is virtually non-existent. It has no combat aircraft and only a handful of transports.

Improving the runways has allowed the Air Force to move B1-B bombers from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean to

Copyright © www.acdn.net

Balad, where the big aircraft have been carrying out daily strikes. A B1-B can carry up to 24 tons of bombs.

The step-up in air attacks is partly a reflection of how beaten up and overextended U.S. ground troops are. While Army units put in 15-month tours, Air Force deployments are only four months, with some only half that. And Iraqi and Afghani insurgents have virtually no ability to inflict casualties on aircraft flying at 20,000 feet and using laser and satellite-guided weapons, in contrast to the serious damage they are doing to US ground troops.

Besides increasing the number of F-16s, B1-Bs, and A-10 attack planes, Predator flight hours over both countries have doubled from 2005. "The Predator is coming into its own as a no-kidding weapon verses a reconnaissance-only platform," brags Maj. Jon Dagley, commander of the 46th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron.

The Air Force is also deploying a bigger, faster and more muscular version of the Predator, the MQ-9 "Reaper" - as in grim - a robot capable of carrying four Hellfire missiles, plus two 500 lb. bombs.

The Predators and the Reapers have several advantages, the most obvious being they don't need pilots. "With more Reapers I could send manned airplanes home," says North.

At $8.5 million an aircraft - the smaller Predator comes in at $4.5 million apiece - they are also considerably cheaper than the F-16 ($19 million) the B1-B ($200+ million) and even the A-10 ($9.8 million).

The Air Force plans to deploy 170 Predators and 70 Reapers over the next three years. "It is possible that in our lifetime we will be able to run a war without ever leaving the US," Lt Col David Branham told the New York Times.

The result of the stepped up air war, according to the London-based organization Iraq Body Count, is an increase in civilian casualties. A Lancet study of "excess deaths" caused by the Iraq war found that air attacks were responsible for 13% of the deaths - 76,000 as of June 2006 - and that 50% of the deaths of children under 15 were caused by air strikes.

The number of civilian deaths in Afghanistan from air strikes has created a rift between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United States.
"A senior British commander," according to the New York Times, has pressed U.S. Special Forces (SF) to leave southern Afghanistan because their use of air power was alienating the local people. SFs work in small teams and are dependent on air power for support.

SFs called in an air strike last November near Kandahar that killed 31 nomads. This past April, a similar air strike in Western Afghanistan killed 57 villagers, half of them women and children. Coalition forces are now killing more Afghan civilians than the Taliban are. The escalating death toll has thrown the government of Hamid Karzai into a crisis and the NATO governments into turmoil. "We need to understand that preventing civilian casualties is crucially important in sustaining the support of the population," British Defense Minister Des Browne told the Financial Times.

It has also opened up the allies to the charge of war crimes. In a recent air attack in southern Afghanistan that killed 25 civilians, NATO spokesman Lt. Col Mike Smith said the Taliban were responsible because they were hiding among the civilian population.

But Article 48 of the Geneva Conventions clearly states: "The Parties to the conflict shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants." Article 50 dictates that "The presence within the civilian population of individuals who do not come within the definition of civilian does not deprive the population of its civilian character."

Copyright © www.acdn.net

The stepped up air war in both countries has less to do with a strategic military decision than the reality that the occupations are coming apart at the seams.

For all intents and purposes, the U.S. Army in Iraq is broken, the victim of multiple tours, inadequate forces, and the kind of war Iraq has become: a conflict of shadows, low-tech but highly effective roadside bombs, and a population which is either hostile to the occupation or at least sympathetic to the resistance.

It is much the same in Afghanistan. Lord Inge, the former British chief of staff, recently said, "The situation in Afghanistan is much worse than many people recognize...it is much more serious that people want to recognize." A well-placed military source told the Observer, "If you talk privately to the generals, they are very worried." Faced with defeat or bloody stalemate on the ground, the allies have turned to air power, much as the U.S. did in Vietnam. But, as in Vietnam, the terrible toll bombing inflicts on civilians all but guarantees long-term failure.

"Far from bringing about the intended softening up of the opposition," Phillip Gordon, a Brookings Institute Fellow, told the Asia Times, "bombing tends to rally people behind their leaders and cause them to dig in against outsiders who, whatever the justification, are destroying their homeland."

Conn Hallinan is a Foreign Policy In Focus columnist.

"We Are Going To Hit Iran. Bigtime"

by Maccabee

Sat Sep 01, 2007

I have a friend who is an LSO on a carrier attack group that is planning and staging a strike group deployment into the Gulf of Hormuz. (LSO: Landing Signal Officer- she directs carrier aircraft while landing) She told me we are going to attack Iran. She said that all the Air Operation Planning and Asset Tasking are finished. That means that all the targets have been chosen, prioritized, and tasked to specific aircraft, bases, carriers, missile cruisers and so forth.

I asked her why she is telling me this.

Her answer was really amazing.

She started in the Marines and after 8 years her term was up. She had served on a smaller Marine carrier, and found out through a friend knew there was an opening for a junior grade LSO in a training position on a supercarrier. She used the reference and the information and applied for a transfer to the United States Navy. Since she had experience landing F-18Cs and Cobra Gunships, and an unblemished combat record, she was ratcheted into the job, successfully changing from the Marines to the Navy. Her role is still aligned with the Marines since she generally is assigned to liason with the Marine units deploying off her carrier group.

Like most Marines and former Marines, she is largely apolitical. The fact is, most Marines are trigger pullers and most trigger pullers could care less who the President is. They simply want to be the tip of the sword when it comes to defending the country. She voted once in her life and otherwise was always in some forward post on the water during election season.

Copyright © www.acdn.net

Something is wrong with the Navy and the Marines in her view. Always ready to go in harms way, Marines rarely ever question unless it's a matter of tactics or honor. But something seems awry. Junior and senior officers are starting to grumble, roll their eyes in the hallways. The strain of deployments is beginning to hit every jot and tittle of the Marines and it's beginning to seep into the daily conversation of Marines and Naval officers in command decision.

"I know this will sound crazy coming from a Naval officer", she said. "But we're all just waiting for this administration to end. Things that happen at the senior officer level seem more and more to happen outside of the purview of XOs and other officers who typically have a say-so in daily combat and flight operations. Today, orders just come down from the mountaintop and there's no questioning. In fact, there is no discussing it. I have seen more than one senior commander disappear and then three weeks later we find out that he has been replaced. That's really weird. It's also really weird because everyone who has disappeared has questioned whether or not we should be staging a massive attack on Iran."

"We're not stupid. Most of the members of the fleet read well enough to know what is going on world-wise. We also realize that anyone who has any doubts is in danger of having a long military career yanked out from under them. Keep in mind that most of the people I serve with are happy to be a part of the global war on terror. It's just that the touch points are what we see since we are the ones out here who are supposedly implementing this grand strategy. But when you liason with administration officials who don't know that Iranians don't speak Arabic and have no idea what Iranians live like, then you start having second thoughts about whether these Administration officials are even competent."

I asked her about the attack, how limited and so forth.

"I don't think it's limited at all. We are shipping in and assigning every damn Tomahawk we have in inventory. I think this is going to be massive and sudden, like thousands of targets. I believe that no American will know when it happens until after it happens. And whatever the consequences, whatever the consequences, they will have to be lived with. I am sure if my father knew I was telling someone in a news organization that we were about to launch a supposedly secret attack that it would be treason. But something inside me tells me to tell it anyway."

I asked her why she was suddenly so cynical.

"I have become cynical only recently. I also don't believe anyone will be able to stop this. Bush has become something of an Emperor. He will give the command, and cruise missiles will fly and aircraft will fly and people will die, and yet few of us here are really able to cobble together a great explanation of why this is a good idea. Of course many of us can give you the 4H Club lecture on democracy in the Mid East. But if you asked any of the flight officers whether they have a clear idea of what the goal of this strike is, your answer would sound like something out of a think tank policy paper. But it's not like Kosovo or when we relieved the tsunami victims. There everyone could tell you in a sentence what we were here doing."

"That's what's missing. A real sense of purpose. What's missing is the answer to what the hell are we doing out here threatening this country with all this power? Last night in the galley, an ensign asked what right do we have to tell a sovereign nation that they can't build a nuke. I mean the table got EF Hutton quiet. Not so much because the man was asking a question that was off culture. But that he was asking a good question. In fact, the discussion actually followed afterwards topside where someone in our group had to smoke a cigarette. The discussion was intelligent but also in lowered voices. It's like we aren't allowed to ask the questions that we always ask before combat. It's almost as if the average seaman or soldier is doing all the policy work."

She had to hang up. She left by telling me that she believes the attack is a done deal. "It's only a matter of time

Copyright © www.acdn.net

before their orders come and they will be sent to station and told to go to Red Alert. She said they were already practicing traps, FARP and FAST." (Trapping is the act of catching the tension wires when landing on the carrier, FARP is Fleet Air Combat Maneuvering Readiness Program- practice dogfighting- and FAST is Fleet Air Superiority Training).

She seemed lost. The first time in my life I have ever heard her sound off rhythm, or unsure of why she is doing something. She knows that there is something rotten in the Naval Command and she, like many of her associates are just hoping that the election brings in someone new, some new situation, or something.

"Yes. We're gong to hit Iran, bigtime. Whatever political discussion that are going in is window dressing and perhaps even a red herring. I see what's going on below deck here in the hangars and weapons bays. And I have a sick feeling about how it's all going to turn out."

Copyright © www.acdn.net