

US to spend \$1.3 billion on Afghanistan bases

Bill Van Auken
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The Pentagon is embarking on a major base construction effort in Afghanistan even as Obama administration and military officials are making it clear that the US “surge” will last well past the July 11 deadline for beginning a drawdown of US troops.

The *Washington Post* reported Monday that the US Congress is preparing to pass legislation providing “\$1.3 billion in additional fiscal 2011 funds for multiyear construction of military facilities in Afghanistan”. These funds would cover, in part, \$100 million expansions for each of three major US air bases in different parts of the country.

These projects, the *Post* stated, are indicative of plans “to support increased US military operations well into the future.”

A notice seeking contractor bids placed on a US government web site last week maps out plans for the expansion of one of these US bases in Shindand, an airfield in western Afghanistan that had been used by the Soviet Army during its occupation of Afghanistan more than two decades ago.

The project is to include new runways, hangars, barracks, storage areas, a “weapons arming area” and other facilities. They are being built to accommodate the Special Operations troops used by Washington to carry out “targeted killings,” i.e., assassinations, which have become a key component of the US war. They will also house a unit operating pilotless drone aircraft for purposes of “Intelligence, Surveillance & Reconnaissance” as well as missile attacks.

The request for bids states that the contract will not be issued until January of next year and that the job itself will not be completed until at least a full year after that, i.e., January 2012, six months after the deadline set by President Barack Obama for the beginning of the drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan.

The House of Representatives and the Senate Appropriations Committee have already approved the \$1.3 billion base construction package, which is awaiting only a vote by the full Senate.

This money does not include another \$5.3 billion in allocations for the construction of new facilities for the Afghan security forces, the *Post* reports, citing a Pentagon news release stating that most of these “enduring facilities [are] scheduled for construction over the next three to four years.”

Also to be expanded with the \$1.3 billion appropriation is Camp Dwyer, a Marine base and air field in Helmand province. A Pentagon document justifying the expenditure to Congress describes the facility as “a key hub” for special forces operations in southern Afghanistan, the scene of ongoing US offensives in both Helmand and Kandahar provinces. The base is to be expanded to accommodate more helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft

for expanded attacks on Afghan villages.

The third facility set for a \$100 million expansion is at Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan’s fourth-largest city and the capital of Balkh province in the north. The project, the Pentagon told Congress, was needed “in order to expand major logistical and combat support operations into the region.”

Meanwhile, other major US military facilities continue to expand exponentially. Among them is the Kandahar air base just outside the city of Kandahar, which is being targeted for a major military offensive.

Last month, *Time* magazine published a profile of the Kandahar facility, describing it as “a small Western city in the Taliban heartland” housing some 25,000 troops and contractors. With an average of “5,000-plus military and commercial takeoffs and landings a week,” Kandahar has become “the busiest military base in the world today,” according to the report. The base’s 10-mile security perimeter requires substantial forces to patrol. Armed opposition groups have staged repeated attacks, wounding scores of military and civilian personnel over the past year.

While President Obama insisted when announcing his plans for an Afghanistan “surge” that the US had no intentions of permanently occupying the country, the base construction proposals suggest the opposite. Plans are being implemented based on the assumption that US military forces will be fighting there for years if not decades to come. This protracted war is being waged not to defeat “terrorism” or promote democracy in Afghanistan, but to secure US hegemony in the energy-rich and geo-strategically vital region of Central Asia.

Even as the latest polls indicate that at least 60 percent of the US population opposes the Afghanistan war and seven out of ten do not believe it can be won, top administration and military officials made a series of statements Monday all driving home the same message: do not expect any rapid withdrawal to begin with Obama’s supposed deadline in July 2011.

Speaking to the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Indianapolis Monday, Vice President Joseph Biden stressed that the US war in Afghanistan is “only beginning with the right general and the right force.”

“We are not leaving in 2011,” Biden insisted. “We are beginning the transition.”

The top US commander in charge of training Afghan security forces spoke at a Pentagon briefing Monday, stressing that this “transition” is still a long way off. Lt. Gen. William Caldwell told reporters that it would take at least another year to recruit a sufficient number of Afghan soldiers and police.

The Associated Press commented: “Caldwell’s assessment is

likely to help dim hopes among Democrats that the planned US withdrawal next year will be significant in size.”

The American general spelled out the immense difficulties confronting the US occupation as it attempts to set up a viable puppet Afghan force. The military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* quoted him as saying that the illiteracy rate among Afghan recruits is over 85 percent and the attrition rate among some units is well over 50 percent.

“We really don’t know where they go to, to be completely honest. It’s difficult to track over here,” said Caldwell. Many of these Afghan soldiers disappear shortly after completing 17 weeks of training.

Caldwell said that to bring the Afghan security forces up to a proposed head-count of 305,000, another 56,000 recruits were needed. But, because the desertion rate is so great, it would be necessary to put another 141,000 through training. He said that the target date for meeting this goal was October 2011.

Asked how this October 2011 goal squared with the July 2011 deadline set by Obama, Caldwell stressed that the Afghan forces would not be able to operate independently any time soon. “We have not even finished building the Afghan National Army or the police force or the air force, at this point,” he said. He added that for Afghan troops to operate on their own, “key enablers,” including logistics, maintenance, transportation, and intelligence units would have to be in place. “None of those organizations have been built and brought online,” he said.

The top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, gave an interview in Kabul to the BBC Monday stressing that the July 2011 deadline would not be a fundamental turning point. “That’s a date when a process begins—nothing more, nothing less,” said Petraeus. “It is not the date when the American forces begin an exodus and look for the exit and the light to turn off on the way out of the room.”

The general continued: “It’s a date when the process of transition of some tasks to some Afghanistan forces—in those areas where conditions allow it, and at a pace allowed by the conditions—that’s what begins then.”

Petraeus’ comments were the latest in a series of media appearances in which he emphasized that any US troop drawdown would depend on military “conditions on the ground.”

The general has coupled the clear warning that the Afghanistan “surge” will continue well after next July with claims of progress in the US war against the Afghan resistance. He told the BBC that “the momentum that the Taliban have established over the course of recent years has been reversed in many areas of the country.”

In the face of continuing high casualties, he added, “It gets harder before it gets easier.” Four US soldiers were killed in Afghanistan on Sunday and another four NATO troops, one of them reportedly American, were killed on Monday.

Petraeus’ feigned optimism notwithstanding, the crisis and contradictions confronting the US occupation appear to be deepening.

Over the weekend, Afghan President Hamid Karzai reiterated his order banning the operation of private security contractors inside the country, giving them four months to leave.

In an interview on ABC Television’s “This Week” program,

Karzai charged that the contractors were destabilizing the country by “running a parallel security structure to the Afghan government.” He accused the contractors of “looting and stealing from the Afghan people” and “causing a lot of harassment to our civilians.”

The “surge” of private security contractors into the country has paralleled that of the US military. Contractors now outnumber US troops in Afghanistan.

Directed by US mercenaries, the security contractors employ as many 50,000 Afghans. They have been accused of killing Afghans with impunity as well as making payoffs to the Taliban and other armed anti-government groups to protect convoys bringing supplies to US forces from attack.

The Defense Department employs some 17,000 private security contractors in the country, a five-fold increase in their number since the beginning of 2009. The State Department employs thousands more.

Karzai said that he would exempt from his order those security contractors “providing protection to embassies and to aid organizations within their compounds and who escort diplomats or representatives of foreign governments in Afghanistan from place to place.” He himself is guarded by private mercenaries.

Last June, the State Department signed a \$120 million contract with the notorious Blackwater group, now rebranded as Xe Services, to provide protection for its regional offices in Afghanistan, while the CIA signed a \$100 million deal with the company to provide security at its Kabul station.

The firm earned international infamy after its mercenaries massacred 17 Iraqi civilians in 2007 in Baghdad’s Nisour Square.

The State Department announced Monday that it had reached an administrative settlement with Blackwater under which the company will pay a \$42 million penalty for violating hundreds of export rules over the past seven years, including making illegal arms shipments to Afghanistan. Two former Blackwater mercenaries still face federal murder charges for killing two Afghans civilians. Several former company executives have been indicted on criminal charges.



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