

View Is Bleaker Than Official Portrayal of War in Afghanistan

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A six-year archive of classified military documents made public on Sunday offers an unvarnished, ground-level picture of the war in Afghanistan that is in many respects more grim than the official portrayal.

The secret documents, released on the Internet by an organization called WikiLeaks, are a daily diary of an American-led force often starved for resources and attention as it struggled against an insurgency that grew larger, better coordinated and more deadly each year.

The New York Times, the British newspaper The Guardian and the German magazine Der Spiegel were given access to the voluminous records several weeks ago on the condition that they not report on the material before Sunday.

The documents — some 92,000 reports spanning parts of two administrations from January 2004 through December 2009 — illustrate in mosaic detail why, after the United States has spent almost \$300 billion on the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban are stronger than at any time since 2001.

As the new American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David H. Petraeus, tries to reverse the lagging war effort, the documents sketch a war hamstrung by an Afghan government, police force and army of questionable loyalty and competence, and by a Pakistani military that appears at best uncooperative and at worst to work from the shadows as an unspoken ally of the very insurgent forces the American-led coalition is trying to defeat.

The material comes to light as Congress and the public grow increasingly skeptical of the deepening involvement in Afghanistan and its chances for success as next year's deadline to begin withdrawing troops looms.

The archive is a vivid reminder that the Afghan conflict until recently was a second-class war, with money, troops and attention lavished on Iraq while soldiers and Marines lamented that the Afghans they were training were not being paid.

The reports — usually spare summaries but sometimes detailed narratives — shed light on some elements of the war that have been largely hidden from the public eye:

- The Taliban have used portable heat-seeking missiles against allied aircraft, a fact that has not been publicly disclosed by the military. This type of weapon helped the Afghan mujahedeen defeat the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

- Secret commando units like Task Force 373 — a classified group of Army and Navy special operatives — work from a “capture/kill list” of about 70 top insurgent commanders. These missions, which have been stepped up under the Obama administration, claim notable successes, but have sometimes gone wrong, killing civilians and stoking Afghan resentment.
- The military employs more and more drone aircraft to survey the battlefield and strike targets in Afghanistan, although their performance is less impressive than officially portrayed. Some crash or collide, forcing American troops to undertake risky retrieval missions before the Taliban can claim the drone’s weaponry.
- The Central Intelligence Agency has expanded paramilitary operations inside Afghanistan. The units launch ambushes, order airstrikes and conduct night raids. From 2001 to 2008, the C.I.A. paid the budget of Afghanistan’s spy agency and ran it as a virtual subsidiary.

Over all, the documents do not contradict official accounts of the war. But in some cases the documents show that the American military made misleading public statements — attributing the downing of a helicopter to conventional weapons instead of heat-seeking missiles or giving Afghans credit for missions carried out by Special Operations commandos.

White House officials vigorously denied that the Obama administration had presented a misleading portrait of the war in Afghanistan.

“On Dec. 1, 2009, President Obama announced a new strategy with a substantial increase in resources for Afghanistan, and increased focus on Al Qaeda and Taliban safe-havens in Pakistan, precisely because of the grave situation that had developed over several years,” said Gen. James L. Jones, White House national security adviser, in a statement released Sunday.

“We know that serious challenges lie ahead, but if Afghanistan is permitted to slide backwards, we will again face a threat from violent extremist groups like Al Qaeda who will have more space to plot and train,” the statement said.

General Jones also decried the decision by WikiLeaks to make the documents public, saying that the United States “strongly condemns the disclosure of classified information by individuals and organizations which could put the lives of Americans and our partners at risk, and threaten our national security.”

“WikiLeaks made no effort to contact us about these documents - the United States government learned from news organizations that these documents would be posted,” General Jones said.

The archive is clearly an incomplete record of the war. It is missing many references to seminal events and does not include more highly classified information. The documents also do not cover events in 2010, when the influx of more troops into Afghanistan began and a new counterinsurgency strategy took hold.

They suggest that the military’s internal assessments of the prospects for winning over the Afghan public, especially in the early days, were often optimistic, even naïve.

There are fleeting — even taunting — reminders of how the war began in the occasional references to the elusive Osama bin Laden. In some reports he is said to be attending meetings in Quetta, Pakistan. His money man is said to be flying from Iran to North Korea to buy weapons. Mr. bin Laden has supposedly ordered a suicide attack against the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai. These reports all seem secondhand at best.

The reports portray a resilient, canny insurgency that has bled American forces through a war of small cuts. The insurgents set the war's pace, usually fighting on ground of their own choosing and then slipping away.

Sabotage and trickery have been weapons every bit as potent as small arms, mortars or suicide bombers. So has Taliban intimidation of Afghan officials and civilians — applied with pinpoint pressure through threats, charm, violence, money, religious fervor and populist appeals.

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