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EDITORIAL

Afghanistan on Fire

The news out of Afghanistan is truly alarming. This week, Taliban forces staged two of their most complex and audacious attacks of the war. Nearly 100 insurgents killed 10 French paratroopers in an attack near Kabul. At least 10 suicide bombers mounted a coordinated assault on one of America's largest military bases, wounding three American and six Afghan soldiers. An earlier attack at the base killed 12 Afghan workers.

The number of United States and NATO casualties is mounting so quickly, that unless something happens soon this could be the deadliest year of the Afghan war. Kabul, the seat of Afghanistan's pro-Western government, is increasingly besieged. And Taliban and foreign Qaeda fighters are consolidating control over an expanding swath of territory sprawling across both sides of the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Let us be clear about why this is so dangerous. The more territory the Taliban controls, the more money it can raise from narcotics and black-market activities to mount an even fiercer challenge against the foundering civilian governments in Kabul and Islamabad. And the more territory the Taliban controls, the more freedom Al Qaeda will have to mount new terrorist operations against this country and others.

There is no more time to waste. Unless the United States, NATO and its central Asian allies move quickly, they could lose this war. The following steps need to be taken in the coming weeks.

Washington must finally make clear to Pakistan's leaders the mortal threat they face. The Army must turn its attention from India to the fight against the Taliban. Civilian leaders must realize that there can be no separate peace with the extremists. Sending American troops or warplanes into Pakistani territory will only feed anti-American furies. That should be the job of Pakistan's army, with intelligence help and carefully monitored financial support from the United States.

More American ground troops will have to be sent to Afghanistan. The Pentagon's over-reliance on airstrikes — which have led to high levels of civilian casualties — has dangerously antagonized the Afghan population. This may require an accelerated timetable for shifting American forces from Iraq, where the security situation has grown somewhat less desperate.

NATO also needs to step up its military effort. With Russia threatening to redraw the post-Soviet map of Europe, this is not time for NATO to forfeit its military credibility by losing a war. Europe does not have a lot of available ground troops either. But it needs to send its best ones to Afghanistan and let them fight.

Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, must rein in his government's rampant corruption that has all but driven his people into the hands of the Taliban and criminal warlords. The international community needs to provide more — and more carefully monitored — resources to build up Afghanistan's security forces and administrative capacity and accelerate rural development.

These investments will take time to pay off. But seven years have already been wasted, and unless such efforts begin now there will be no safe exit from Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

Afghanistan's war is not a sideshow. It is the principal military confrontation between America and NATO and the forces responsible for 9/11 and later deadly terrorist attacks on European soil. Washington, NATO and the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan must stop fighting it like a holding action and develop a strategy to win. Otherwise, we will all lose.