

# **Business and Politics in the Muslim World**

## **Afghanistan This Week**

Report Number: 107

Week 14-21 February 2010

February, 22, 2010

**Mohammad Amin**

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# **Political Headlines Summary**

## **Tough Part of Afghan Offensive Lies Ahead: UK**

British Defence Secretary warns that the tough part of Operation Moshtarak is just about to begin.

## **Iran Again Accused of Trying to Halt Afghan Dam**

Police official says he has credible evidence that Taliban chief opposed to Salma Dam is funded by Iranians

## **US army officer on raw material**

WASHINGTON - Getting the raw material needed to build forward operating in Afghanistan bases from remote locations is one of the toughest challenges facing the army unit tasked with providing infrastructure facilities to American soldiers.

## **Afghan flag-raising in NATO offensive draws gunfire**

MARJAH - A U.S. Marine company position came under intense fire from all sides on Sunday, at a building where an Afghan flag had been raised to mark progress in a NATO offensive against a Taliban stronghold.

## **Gen Sir Richard Dannatt: Operation Moshtarak will be worth the cost**

Operation Moshtarak, the largest operation in Afghanistan since the Taliban were overthrown, will be worth the human costs that will be suffered, says General Sir Richard Dannatt.

## **Khalilzad downbeat about peace plan**

WASHINGTON - A former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad, is not confident of the success of the reintegration and reconciliation approach being pursued by the Karzai government.

## **The mistaken killing of 12 Afghan civilians prompts U.S. apology**

KABUL — Twelve Afghan civilians died Sunday after U.S. rockets mistakenly hit a house during the much-trumpeted offensive to clear the last Taliban stronghold in Helmand province, a loss of life that is likely to seriously undermine the operation and the renewed American-led mission to win the trust of the population.

## **Five Afghan civilians accidentally killed in airstrike: NATO**

KABUL — Five Afghan civilians were accidentally killed and two others injured in an airstrike in southern Afghanistan, NATO said Monday, in an incident unrelated to a major US-led anti-Taliban operation.

## **Surprise tactic in Afghanistan offensive befuddles Taliban**

LASHKAR GAH — U.S. Marines and Afghan forces airlifted over the Taliban -laid minefields into the center of Marjah town Saturday, apparently surprising the insurgents and taking strategic positions from them, according to military officials.

## **Taliban bastion 'almost' under control: Afghan army**

LASHKAR GAH – The Afghan military on Monday said US-led troops had taken almost full control of a Taliban bastion at the centre of a massive ground and air assault that was in its third day.

## **Afghanistan's government seeks more control over elections**

The new draft proposes limiting the number of female members in the Wolesi Jirga.

## **Arab Fighters Gunned Down in Helmand**

A local Taliban commander and four Arab insurgents were killed Monday in an airstrike in Helmand province, an official said.

## **Afghans Suspect Foreign Hand in Poll Delay**

Postponement of general election viewed with suspicion by ordinary people and analysts.

## **Afghan challenger Abdullah touts new coalition**

PARIS (AFP) – Afghan President Hamid Karzai's top political rival on Friday announced the launch of a new coalition to fight for a multi-party system in September's parliamentary election.

## **General Sees Positives in Afghan Army Training**

WASHINGTON, Feb. 19, 2010 – Though training an Afghan army essentially from the ground up has been a difficult undertaking, an Army general involved in the effort said yesterday that he's seeing positive results.

## **Afghan president slams civilian deaths by US-led force**

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has once again criticized foreign troops for killing civilians in the new US-led operations against militants.

## **Holbrooke Says Tajikistan Important For Outcome In Afghanistan**

(RFE/RL) -- U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke said in Dushanbe today that Tajikistan was "a country of immense importance if one wants to have a peaceful outcome in Afghanistan," RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

## **Reconciliation, a Need for Afghanistan: Karzai**

President Karzai called on the Taliban on Saturday to accept his peace deal.

## **Afghanistan Upper House chief resigns**

KABUL, Feb. 20 (Xinhua) -- Sibghatullah Mujadadi, the chief of Afghanistan's Mushrano Jirga or Upper House of parliament, rendered his resignation on Saturday. "I am rendering my resignation to the president and the nation and requesting his Excellency the President to approve it," Mujadadi announced at the joint session of parliament resumed after winter vocation.

## **Abdullah slams Karzai's Taliban peace offer**

The Afghan president's main rival in last year's elections has expressed doubt about the success of the government's US-backed offer of peace with the Taliban.

## **Thousands trapped in Afghan assault zone**

People have little access to food, medicine: rights group

## **Dutch troops 'to leave Afghanistan as planned' - PM**

A day after his cabinet collapsed, the Dutch prime minister says he expects Dutch troops to end their mission in Afghanistan in August as expected.

## **Dutch exit could leave key Afghan area vulnerable**

KABUL - The likely exit of Dutch troops from Afghanistan leaves a key province in the heart of the nation vulnerable to Taliban infiltration - especially if militants are pushed out of their sanctuaries in the south.

## **Dutch hesitancy doesn't faze NATO occupiers**

NATO says its troops will stay in Afghanistan as long as necessary despite the uncertain future of Dutch troops in the Central Asian nation.

## **Taliban reject renewed Karzai call for peace**

KABUL - Afghanistan's Taliban on Sunday rejected President Hamid Karzai's latest call for peace, despite pressure from a NATO offensive and the capture of its number 2.

## **Rocket attack kills Afghan woman, wounds 3 others in E Afghanistan**

KABUL, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- A rocket attack launched by insurgents has claimed the life of a woman and injured three others in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, said a press release of the Interior Ministry issued here on Sunday.

## **'CIA Seeks Baradar's Transfer to Bagram'**

CIA wants Pakistan to extradite the Taliban's second-in command Mullah Baradar to Bagram prison for interrogation.

## **Third NATO soldier dies in 24 hours**

NATO announced Sunday that another foreign soldier has been killed in Afghanistan, where foreign forces have launched a major offensive against the Taliban.

## **Operation on Taliban slows down in minefields in S Afghanistan**

KABUL, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- As Operation Moshtarak, or Together, launched by the NATO-led troops and Afghan forces entered into its second week on Saturday, Major General Nick Carter, the British commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan, said his forces face stiff resistance in parts of Marjah.

## **Operation on Taliban just the beginning: top U.S. commander**

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- The joint Afghan-NATO assault against Taliban bastion in southern Afghanistan is just the beginning of a long campaign, which may last up to 18 months, a top U.S. commander said on Sunday.

## **Helmand elders want US-led forces out**

Tribal elders in the southern Afghan province of Helmand want an end to the US-led anti-Taliban offensive there, citing Western troops' disregard for civilian lives as a reason.

## **Economical Economical Headlines Summary**

### **Afghanistan calls for investments by Iranian firms**

Afghanistan invites Iranian firms to help develop economic cooperation between the two countries by investing in different fields in the country.

### **Afghanistan interested in Pak tax reforms**

ISLAMABAD: Afghanistan has shown keen interest in the reforms process under way in the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), with a view to using the reforms as a model to revamp its own taxation system

## **Social Headlines Summary**

### **Afghan Govt Pays For Avalanche Victims**

The Afghan government pays \$2,000 to the families of each victim of Tuesday's deadly avalanches in the Salang Pass

## **8 renegade Afghan police arrested in S. Afghanistan**

KABUL, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- Afghan National Police (ANP) during a search operation in the country's southern Zabul province have arrested eight policemen who joined Taliban militants days ago, Deputy to Provincial police chief said Sunday.

## **Food, medicine lacking in Afghan assault zone**

KABUL — People living on the front line of a major US-led offensive against Taliban militants in southern Afghanistan are trapped in their homes with little access to food and health care, rights groups say.

## **Teacher Shortage Hits Hard in Maidan Wardak**

Students complain lack of decent teachers, textbooks and discipline is damaging their education.

# Political Headlines

## Tough Part of Afghan Offensive Lies Ahead: UK

Written by Lotfullah Najafizada  
Monday, 15 February 2010 12:02

British Defence Secretary warns that the tough part of Operation Moshtarak is just about to begin.

The first stage of the offensive in Helmand, involving 15,000 coalition troops, has been declared a success, but according to Secretary Bob Ainsworth the hard part still lies ahead.

"The hard bit in many ways starts now though," Secretary Ainsworth said on Sunday.

"Because having taken control of the area, we now need to provide security for the people who live there, and ... look after them, so that the Taliban can't return and intimidate them as they have in the past," he said.

Quqnoos's correspondent Jawed Zeyartjahi in Helmand says US and Afghan forces are facing sporadic rocket and mortar fire in Marjah on Monday -- the third day of the operation to reclaim the key town.

NATO have confirmed its third soldier to die during the operation as coalition and Afghan forces move through suspected insurgent neighborhoods in Marjah and Nad Ali.

Operation Moshtarak, NATO's biggest offensive against the Taliban since the Afghan war began in 2001, is designed to extend Kabul's influence over the last big rebel stronghold in Helmand province.

Nearly 4,000 British troops have been targeting Nad Ali, a key Taliban stronghold while thousands of American soldiers stormed Marjah -- a hub for Taliban's narco-trade.

US top military officer, Admiral Mike Mullen said Sunday the offensive began well but its completion is difficult to predict.

"It's off to a good start," Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters during a visit to Israel when asked about progress in Afghan operation, now in its third day.

"We would like to have no civilian casualties. I mean this is focused on the people, this is not focused on the Taliban," Mullen said.

On the second day of the operation -- a day after NATO claimed early success -- at least 12 Afghan civilians were killed in a rocket strike, mistakenly hit a house in the Nad Ali.

Asked when the town of Marjah might be taken and pacified, Mullen said: "It's actually very difficult to predict. We have, from a planning standpoint, talked about a few weeks, but I honestly don't know that. This is a very different operation."

## **Iran Again Accused of Trying to Halt Afghan Dam**

IWPR

02/14/2010

By Shapoor Saber in Herat

Police official says he has credible evidence that Taleban chief opposed to Salma Dam is funded by Iranians. Tehran has again been accused of attempting to stop work on an Indian-funded dam project in western Afghanistan, which would reduce the flow of river water into Iran. The fresh allegations, by a police battalion commander protecting the Salma Dam, follow the Taleban killing of a local Afghan district official who was promoting the project. Last October, a member of the Afghan parliament reportedly charged Iran with trying to sabotage it. The dam on the Hari Rud river, funded by a 150 million US dollars grant from the government of India, is located in the district of Chesht-e-Sharif, 180 kilometres east of Herat city and well away from the border with Iran.

Once completed, it will provide irrigation for 75,000 hectares of farmland and generate electricity. But Iran will lose the unfettered use of the water now flowing to it from the Hari Rud river.

When the governor of Chesht-e-Sharif district, Abdulqudus Qayam, was killed along with five security officials in mid-January, the Afghan media called it an insurgent attack. The Taleban accepted responsibility, but many in Herat saw it as part of a wider problem the province is having with Iran.

Qayam had been instrumental in pushing the construction of the Salma Dam, according to Gulbuddin, head of the police battalion guarding the project.

Herat has long been hailed as one of the most stable and secure provinces in Afghanistan. It is relatively prosperous, having profited from the long stewardship of Ismail Khan, who ruled the area in the early 1990s and again from 2001-2003.

Khan was famous for keeping the bulk of Herat's customs revenues in the province,

refusing to send them to the central coffers. But once Khan was called to Kabul as minister for water and energy in 2004, Herat's fortunes began to decline.

Over the last few years, security has also been deteriorating, with the eastern part of the province becoming increasingly unstable.

"Abdulqudus, the late governor of Chesht-e-Sharif district, was a hardworking man who tried his best to construct the Salma Dam," Gulbuddin said. "But those who wanted to destroy the project killed him."

According to Gulbuddin, a man called Mirza had called government officials to claim responsibility for the attack. Mirza is a fugitive in the mountains around Chesht-e-Sharif, and has been in contact with the Taleban, Gulbuddin said.

The police battalion commander said he had evidence that a local Taleban commander opposed to the dam was being funded by Iranians.

"A member of the armed opposition called Mullah Mustafa is trying to stop the Salma Dam," Gulbuddin said. "He has about 200 men in the area."

Gulbuddin insisted that he had credible information that elements in Iran were providing money to this band to stop the construction project.

"Mullah Mustafa has promised Iran that he will succeed in halting work on the Salma Dam," he said.

The consulate of Iran in Herat declined to comment on the allegations and the Iranian embassy in Kabul could not be contacted. An Iranian embassy spokesman in London also could not be reached.

It is not the first time that Iran has been accused of meddling in Afghanistan's affairs. Numerous reports have surfaced over the past few years about Iran's alleged support for insurgents in the border region - claims Iranian officials have strenuously denied.

While predominantly Shia Iran would seem to be an unusual partner for the overwhelmingly Sunni Taleban, observers have suggested that Iran may think that by keeping the United States pinned down in Afghanistan it will be unable to direct its full attention to Iran.

Last year, parliamentarian Najibullah Kabuli accused Iran of interfering in the construction of the Salma Dam.

"We want to stop water from flowing into Iran and Pakistan," he told a protest meeting in Kabul last October. "Every Iranian is benefiting from the water but not the Afghans who have the right to it."

According to Pajhwok Afghan News, Kabuli alleged that Iran was intent on stopping the construction, which was the reason why construction workers on the project had been repeatedly attacked.

Senior security officials are much more cautious in their assessments, however.

"We cannot say anything unless we have authentic documents about involvement of neighbouring countries in such cases," said General Ekramuddin Yawar, police commander for western Afghanistan.

But Ahmad Ghani Khesrawi, a lecturer at Herat University, believes that interference from neighbouring countries has been one of the biggest problems Afghanistan has faced over the past three decades of war.

"Whenever a big project has been proposed or implemented in Afghanistan, our neighbours have tried to stop it, or put obstacles in front of it, even if it damages them politically or economically," he said.

"The construction of Salma Dam has been a particular focus of Iran's. If the dam is completed, Afghanistan's dependence on Iran will be reduced; Iran will also suffer from loss of water. There is no doubt that Iran is against the Salma Dam."

Khesrawi faults the Afghan government for failing to take action.

His complaint is echoed by local people. Ibrahim, 26, a resident of Herat, said, "Since the day that construction began on Salma Dam, not only governors but construction workers, engineers, and security police have been killed," he said.

"Iran's hostility towards Afghanistan is as clear as day, and I do not know why our government is acting deaf and dumb."

## **US army officer on raw material**

Pajhwok  
02/14/2010

WASHINGTON - Getting the raw material needed to build forward operating in Afghanistan bases from remote locations is one of the toughest challenges facing the army unit tasked with providing infrastructure facilities to American soldiers.

In an interaction with reporters, the First Naval Construction Division commander said he was also looking into the possibility of procuring raw material domestically and regionally for providing infrastructure facilities to US soldiers in Afghanistan.

"Getting material to and from remote locations is much more challenging in Afghanistan. So for us, getting our heavy equipment and then getting our construction materials into those locations is probably the greatest challenge that we have had," he argued.

Rear Admiral Mark Handley told reporters at a round table: "The other thing we're finding is that you really need to be operating out of the forward operating bases, which get much more to the local level of activity. That's where, I think, the Marines are going to have the greatest success on the ground, and we're there to support them in building those forward operating bases."

The rear admiral said he was using both the sea and air routes to bring equipment into Afghanistan. All equipment was moved with a combination of air and sea lift, which went to Karachi before reaching Afghanistan, he added.

Getting the construction material was probably one of their greatest concerns, the official remarked. "And we find that it's a very long lead-time for us to get material. In the past, we've been able to get and resource general building materials, mostly lumber. But as we go into more specialty materials -- some electrical materials that we need"

He said they were working through the army system in Afghanistan, as well as the Defence Logistics Agency, in order to improve the flow of materials. "But our ability to be successful today has been the fact that we have reached very far into the future of what we believe our requirements are going to be, and we've anticipated fairly well."

## **Afghan flag-raising in NATO offensive draws gunfire**

Reuters  
02/14/2010

MARJAH - A U.S. Marine company position came under intense fire from all sides on Sunday, at a building where an Afghan flag had been raised to mark progress in a NATO offensive against a Taliban stronghold.

U.S. Marines spearheaded one of NATO's biggest offensives against the Taliban in Afghanistan on Saturday, in an early test of U.S. President Barack Obama's troop surge

policy.

Marines in helicopters landed in Marjah district, the last big Taliban stronghold in Helmand province, in the first hours of a NATO campaign to impose government control on rebel-held areas before U.S. forces start a planned 2011 drawdown.

Captain Ryan Sparks compared the intensity of the fighting to the U.S.-led offensive against foreign and Iraqi al Qaeda militants in the town of Fallujah in 2004.

"In Fallujah, it was just as intense. But there, we started from the north and worked down to the south. In Marjah, we're coming in from different locations and working toward the center, so we're taking fire from all angles," Sparks said.

NATO and Afghan troops may have advanced in an offensive against the Taliban in Afghanistan, but the attack -- one of several-- at the small flag-raising ceremony drew gunfire and suggested the Taliban had no intentions of laying down arms.

"I have always dreamed of raising the Afghanistan flag over Marjah," said 22-year-old Afghan soldier Almast Khan, at the ceremony before Marines protecting the building started coming under gunfire attack.

#### MILITANTS KILLED

A senior Afghan army general in southern Afghanistan, Sher Mohammad Zazai, told Reuters on Sunday that between 30 to 35 insurgents were killed since the operation in Marjah and the nearby Nad Ali districts started.

Citing commanders, Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf said on the group's website that it had launched direct attacks on NATO-led troops in several parts of Marjah and had surrounded some in one area.

Marjah has long been a breeding ground for insurgents and lucrative opium poppy cultivation, which Western countries say funds the insurgency.

The scale of the problem was glaring at the compound taken over by the Marines.

Bags of drugs worth hundreds of thousands of dollars had been discovered, as were sacks of chemicals capable of producing 100 pounds of explosives, said Tim Coderre, a civilian adviser to Marine officials.

The 15,000-troop NATO operation was named Mushtarak, or "together," perhaps to highlight that NATO and Afghan forces were determined to work closely to restore stability to Afghanistan.

Whether the apparent early progress can translate into a more permanent end to the insurgency may depend on the government's ability to ensure long-term political and

economic stability.

Even if NATO deals a heavy blow to the Taliban in Helmand, militants on the U.S. hit list operate from other sanctuaries inside Pakistan or close to the border.

U.S.-allied Pakistan is reluctant to pursue them as it sees these groups as assets to counter the influence of rival India in Afghanistan.

Decades ago, the Marjah area was home to an Afghan-U.S. development project. Its canals, which criss-cross lush farmland, were built by the Americans.

## **Gen Sir Richard Dannatt: Operation Moshtarak will be worth the cost**

2010-02-14

Surghar

By Mohammad Soltan Sharifi

Operation Moshtarak, the largest operation in Afghanistan since the Taliban were overthrown, will be worth the human costs that will be suffered, says General Sir Richard Dannatt. So, after being well trailed for the past week, Operation Moshtarak, has begun in central Helmand. We are told that it is the largest operation of the current campaign in southern Afghanistan, but the principal question on everyone's mind is: "Will it work?", and then there is the very proper question: "Will it be worth the inevitable human cost?" The answer to both those questions has to be "Yes", and I will explain why.

If the central rationale for our presence in Afghanistan is to establish a sufficiently functioning state, stable enough to deny Islamist extremists safe haven from which to prepare and launch attacks on the West in pursuit of their wider agenda to recreate the historic Islamic Caliphate through force rather than conviction, then central Helmand is key.

The area around Marja and Nad-e-Ali in central Helmand is the heart of the opium poppy industry, the revenue of which significantly sustains the insurgency through lining the peoples' pockets while under the protection of the Taliban.

The Taliban know that they must control the wealth and people of central Helmand, as the key to controlling Kandahar with its clear axis of influence to controlling Kabul. So

central Helmand is vital ground and its people, to use a military expression, are the centre of gravity. If we win the hearts and minds of the people of central Helmand, we can turn this campaign.

Gen Stanley McChrystal, the overall Nato commander in Afghanistan, has been very clear from the moment that he took over, that this campaign is about people and not about winning bloody battles against the Taliban. He has given clear direction that all operations should be designed with the security and safety of the Afghan population as the top priority. Winning their hearts and minds is the objective, not blowing their hearts many yards away from their minds.

Within this direction, Maj Gen Nick Carter, the British commander in southern Afghanistan, has devised Operation Moshtarak.

What we have heard over the past week in advance of the launch of the operation was part of the shaping phase. Those civilians who were not committed Taliban were being given the chance to leave the area before fighting began, while 300 local representatives met at Governor Gulab Mangal's request to debate whether they wanted the Taliban to stay or for the security forces to throw them out.

But while these Afghans might look like biblical characters, they are shrewd. The calculation was simple. "Do I accept the offer of wheat seed and free fertilisers this year and trust the government to protect me, or do I go on growing poppies and hope that the Taliban will prevent my crops being eradicated?"

The Shura voted to give the government a chance, with the plea that in any fighting, heavy weapons were not used. So in an elementary way, the Taliban have been voted out of central Helmand, the task of the British, American and Afghan forces is to show them the door, whether killed or captured is up to them, but in any event, rejected by the people and totally discredited.

The British Task Force commander in central Helmand, Brig James Cowan, the veteran Commanding Officer of The Black Watch in Iraq, has set out his intentions very publicly. He will clear the area of Taliban, then hold it in sufficient strength so that the people are confident in the government's ability to protect them and thereby lay the foundations for the civilian agencies to build a better future for the people. Replacing poppies with wheat, saffron or pomegranate is a start, but the significance is to build an economy based on

legal activity, not criminal endeavour. Good governance, fair policing and the rule of law, albeit based on tribal laws and customs, will only come about if the core of the society is based on a legal economy.

The Afghan-led, coalition-supported, follow-up phases to this operation will be the decisive ones. “Moshtarak” means “together”, and that is the theme, increasingly Afghan-led.

On the military side, last year there were only about 5,000 coalition troops in Helmand, this year there are between 30,000 to 40,000 British, American and Afghan soldiers.

Many of us have long argued for enough boots on the ground to hold the areas we have cleared. Whose feet were in those boots was not the issue, but there had to be enough of them. Today we have gone significantly in the right direction. And the quality of the Afghan national army is growing steadily.

The key to enduring success now is the civilian effort to build a better life for the people. They are asking for it, we are committed to giving it to them. It is in their interest, and it is in our interest too. Our soldiers know this and that is why their focus is clear, their morale is high and we need to continue to give them our full support.

## **Khalilzad downbeat about peace plan**

Pajhwok  
02/14/2010

WASHINGTON - A former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad, is not confident of the success of the reintegration and reconciliation approach being pursued by the Karzai government.

In a rare interview to the PBS News channel, Afghanistan-born Khalilzad said both the reintegration and reconciliation processes being pushed by the new government in Kabul was facing serious challenges.

"Both the national reconciliation level and the reintegration level prospects for success are very much conditions-based. And we face serious challenges with regard to both," he remarked.

At the reintegration level, he argued, the government must control the territory where local commanders were operating, if they were to be lured into the process. That was the most important thing, the diplomat stressed

"Unless we can offer security for those who turn in, work with us, they will be at risk and their prospects to stay with us will not last. In addition, of course, there are political and economic incentives.

"At the national level, at the reconciliation level, two things are important: One is that the overall situation has to be one in which the government and coalition side has to be winning. At least, that's what the Taliban leadership has to believe."

Khalilzad said in recent weeks President Karzai had been focused on convincing Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in particular that reconciliation and a deal between Afghans and the Taliban were in their interests, and they should work hard for it.

"All of this is very much in doubt at the present time," he felt, noting that the United States had an important role to play in this regard. For the US role to be effectively played, he believes there must be coordination and agreement with the Afghan government.

"At the present time, there seems to be some difficulty in the focus between the two sides where President Karzai is very much talking about national-level reconciliation as the primary focus; and we, the coalition, are talking more about reintegration," he observed.

## **The mistaken killing of 12 Afghan civilians prompts U.S. apology**

McClatchy Newspapers

02/15/2010

By Saeed Shah

KABUL — Twelve Afghan civilians died Sunday after U.S. rockets mistakenly hit a house during the much-trumpeted offensive to clear the last Taliban stronghold in Helmand province, a loss of life that is likely to seriously undermine the operation and the renewed American-led mission to win the trust of the population.

The use of the rockets has been suspended pending a "thorough review" of the incident, the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force said in a statement.

An Afghan soldier and a Marine were injured in the firefight that preceded the rocket attack, on the second day of an operation to take control of the town of Marjah and the surrounding district of Nad Ali.

Operation Moshtarak, which means "together," is the biggest assault on the Taliban since the fall of the Islamic extremists' government in 2001 and the first major test of the new U.S. strategy for quelling the insurgency and stabilizing Afghanistan . A centerpiece to the offensive has been to minimize civilian casualties and the use of force.

A combined force of U.S., Afghan and British soldiers continued to come under sporadic fire Sunday, while facing constant danger from Taliban -laid mines, roadside bombs and booby-traps.

The large number of civilian deaths in a single incident calls into question the approach to the operation, and provides easy propaganda points to the Taliban enemy. Most of the 80,000 residents of Marjah stayed in their homes, despite weeks of public build-up to the assault.

After managing to avoid civilian casualties on the first day of the operation, which was declared a success, Sunday — Day Two — brought disaster.

A Marine unit embedded with Afghan soldiers, which came under sustained fire from two directions, called in a strike from heavy-duty munitions known as a Himars, which is a rocket system fired from a truck. Two rockets landed some 300 yards off target, killing the 12 civilians and wounding one.

"We deeply regret this tragic loss of life," said Stanley McChrystal , the U.S. general who leads international forces in Afghanistan . "The current operation in Central Helmand is aimed at restoring security and stability to this vital area of Afghanistan . It's regrettable that in the course of our joint efforts, innocent lives were lost."

McChrystal telephoned Afghan President Hamid Karzai to apologize for what he called the "unfortunate incident." The Afghan leader had cautioned the forces, as the operation began, to "exercise absolute caution to avoid harming civilians." The death of innocent Afghans in the war, often caused by misdirected air strikes, has inflamed public opinion in Afghanistan .

At issue is whether the use of the rockets was proportionate to the threat and why the weapon went so far wide of its intended target. The wrong co-ordinates could have been fed into the rocket launcher, or it suffered some technical failure, military officials believe.

An ISAF official, who could not be named because of the sensitivity of the issue, said that the rockets were used after enemy fire made it impossible for helicopters to come in to evacuate the two injured soldiers. As evening fell in Afghanistan on Sunday, the Marine and Afghan unit were still under fire, more than 10 hours after the engagement began, he said.

"This (Himars) is a heavy thing to use under these circumstances but they used something

that is usually very precise," the NATO official said. "They probably felt this was better than calling in an air attack."

The scale of operation, involving 15,000 soldiers, a large civilian presence, together with hundreds of Taliban fighting desperately against hopeless odds, and a town rigged with booby-traps, make civilian losses inevitable, analysts believe.

McChrystal, the pioneer of a new counter-insurgency strategy in Afghanistan, is faced with a delicate balance: the need to safeguard his own forces and the imperative of preventing civilian casualties. He has issued a series of directives to rein in the use of force, in an effort to win over an Afghan population often alienated and terrified by the use of air strikes and raids on homes. But that has brought criticism from within the military and in the U.S. that he was hamstringing soldiers in the field and putting their lives at risk.

"Civilian casualties have been one of the big issues that have been troubling the relationship between President Karzai, the Afghan people and international forces," said John Dempsey, head of the Afghanistan office of the U.S. Institute of Peace, an independent research organization.

So far in the operation, the Taliban resistance has been generally weak.

According to Dawood Ahmedi, a spokesman for the provincial governor of Helmand, 27 insurgents were killed so far, with five wounded and 11 arrested. The advancing force has uncovered 5,500 lbs of explosives.

"We are achieving our aims," Ahmedi said, speaking before the news of the civilian deaths. "The problem we are facing is the enemy has buried many mines, so the forces have to fight with both the enemy and the mines."

## **Five Afghan civilians accidentally killed in airstrike: NATO**

AFP

01/15/2010

By

KABUL — Five Afghan civilians were accidentally killed and two others injured in an airstrike in southern Afghanistan, NATO said Monday, in an incident unrelated to a major US-led anti-Taliban operation.

The deaths were accidental, NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said, adding that the victims had been mistaken for insurgents planting improvised bombs.

"An ISAF airstrike against suspected insurgents accidentally killed five and wounded two

civilians in the Zhari district of Kandahar province today," ISAF said in a statement.

"This event was not part of Operation Moshtarak," it added, referring to the massive assault in neighbouring Helmand province, where 15,000 US-led troops are aiming to eradicate militants from one of their last bastions in the south.

The incident comes a day after ISAF said 12 Afghan civilians were killed when two rockets missed their intended target in Helmand's Nad Ali district and slammed into a residential compound.

US General Stanley McChrystal, who commands 113,000 US and NATO troops in Afghanistan to fight the Taliban-led insurgency, apologised for that incident, which marked the first civilian casualties of Operation Mushtarak.

Monday's incident took place in Kandahar, the site of the Taliban's base from 1996 until its overthrow by US-led forces in late 2001.

ISAF said the airstrike had been ordered after a patrol of Afghan and ISAF soldiers observed people they thought were burying improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, the homemade bombs that have exacted a devastating toll on troops and civilians alike.

"A joint Afghan-ISAF patrol observed the individuals digging along a path, and believed that the individuals were emplacing an IED," the statement said.

"The joint patrol called for an airstrike. Following the strike, the Afghan-ISAF patrol approached the scene and determined the individuals had not been emplacing an IED.

"The joint patrol provided immediate first aid, and the wounded were flown to an ISAF medical facility for treatment," the statement said, adding an apology from Major General Michael Regner, ISAF Joint Command's deputy chief of staff for joint operations.

ISAF did not identify the nationality of the foreign soldiers involved in the incident.

Civilian casualties are an incendiary issue among Afghans, who often blame these on the presence of foreign soldiers despite the fact that most civilian casualties, according to the United Nations, are caused by Taliban attacks.

The Taliban deftly exploits civilian deaths and injuries to turn public opinion against foreign involvement in the war, now in its ninth year.

President Hamid Karzai on Sunday issued a warning to troops in the Helmand offensive to take all measures to avoid harming residents.

## Surprise tactic in Afghanistan offensive befuddles Taliban

McClatchy Newspapers

02/15/2010

By Saeed Shah and Janan Zerk

LASHKAR GAH — U.S. Marines and Afghan forces airlifted over the Taliban -laid minefields into the center of Marjah town Saturday, apparently surprising the insurgents and taking strategic positions from them, according to military officials.

Although billed as a major confrontation between the international coalition and Afghan forces and the Taliban , the first day of the offensive in the southern Helmand province saw only sporadic fighting. Two coalition soldiers were killed, along with about 20 insurgents. It was the biggest assault since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.

The helicopter airlift into the heart of the city of 80,000 started around 2 a.m. and allowed the troops to quickly establish 11 posts throughout Marjah, while the bulk of the 15,000-man force carefully picked its way overland.

The operation had been deliberately telegraphed in advance for weeks but the military tactics still seem to have surprised the enemy.

"We appear to have caught the insurgents on the hop. He appears to be completely dislocated," Major General Nick Carter , the British officer who is in charge of operations in south Afghanistan , told reporters at his base in Kandahar . "I'm much encouraged by the way things are going but I'm also conscious that this is only the end of the beginning."

Marjah is the last Taliban stronghold in Helmand and also the hub for a thriving heroin business in the province, which fuels the insurgents.

The U.S.-led NATO offensive, called Moshtarak, which means "together," is a joint operation between the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan army. It is designed to showcase both Afghan capability and the coalition's new approach to the war.

The extra manpower for Afghanistan announced by President Barack Obama is designed to allow the coalition to not only take territory from the insurgents but now to hold it, while Afghan police and government services come in to make the population feel secure and encourage their interest in the benefits of a stable state presence there.

The majority of Marjah's residents have not evacuated so the coalition warned remaining residents to stay inside their homes. Locals interviewed by McClatchy claimed that the Taliban were preventing residents from leaving town. The Taliban seemed intent on using homes as firing positions.

As the military attacks against the Taliban have increased in recent months, civilian

casualties also have risen.

The Taliban strategy for defending Marjah seemed designed to heighten civilian casualties thereby undermining the new U.S. strategy for stabilizing Afghanistan , which is focused on "protecting the population".

Hajji Naimat made it from Marjah Saturday morning only by taking a circuitous route, first diverting south to Nawa, before heading north to the provincial capital Lashkar Gah , where several hundred families have taken refuge.

"The area is surrounded by ISAF and ANA ( Afghan National Army )," Naimat told McClatchy . "The Taliban are not allowing us to go out (of Marjah). It was only with great difficulty that we made it here."

"Our situation is very bad. The center (of Marjah) is in the hands of ANA and ISAF. We are not allowed to come out of our houses. When the Taliban came to enter our house, we told them: 'For God's sake, to leave us alone,'" said Hajji Sakhidad, speaking by phone from Marjah.

Sakhidad said that, as they were turning the Taliban away from their door, gunfire some distance away injured his cousin.

One British soldier was killed by a roadside bomb while patrolling in a vehicle. The other ISAF casualty, whose nationality was not released, was killed by small arms fire. Initial reports are that he is American.

Separately, a roadside bomb killed three U.S. soldiers in the neighboring province of Kandahar , another violent area, which may be next for a concerted offensive.

In Kabul, Afghanistan's defense minister Abdul Rahim Wardak said the offensive is going according to plan.

"(Marjah) is mined heavily so we have to be slow. We have to be slow in the process of clearing that area. But so far our advance is as per schedule. There has been sporadic resistance and firing from here and there," Wardak told reporters in Kabul .

The Taliban were given weeks of warning of the operation, in an apparent deliberate attempt to pressure them into simply leaving the town. That provided plenty of time for them to mine and booby-trap the city and the surrounding villages. It is unclear how many of the estimated 2,000 Taliban fighters in Marjah stuck around to confront the Afghan and coalition armies but, if they followed their typical guerrilla tactics, most would have fled.

Wardak said: "Some of them ( Taliban ) have already left, there might be several hundred still." The defense minister said troops found burnt copies of the Koran strewn about in Marjah, seemingly in an attempt to malign the foreign soldiers. The desecration of the

Muslim holy book caused recent riots in Afghanistan .

"The enemy is playing with people's emotions," Wardak said.

Some 15,000 soldiers are involved in the Marjah operation, with the British soldiers focused on the surrounding villages of Nad-e Ali district. A civilian effort, including Afghans and others from the international community, is supposed to follow just behind the troops.

## **Taliban bastion 'almost' under control: Afghan army**

AFP

02/15/2010

By Sardar Ahmad

LASHKAR GAH – The Afghan military on Monday said US-led troops had taken almost full control of a Taliban bastion at the centre of a massive ground and air assault that was in its third day.

The offensive is the first major test of US President Barack Obama's strategy to reverse the Taliban insurgency and end the eight-year war, and one of the biggest since the 2001 US-led invasion brought down the Taliban.

US Marines were leading 15,000 US, NATO and Afghan troops in the ground and air operation designed to clear the Taliban from the Marjah region of the southern province of Helmand and make way for Western-backed authorities.

So far at least 12 Afghan civilians and two NATO soldiers have been killed in Operation Mushtarak ("Together" in Dari). Another five NATO soldiers have died elsewhere in southern Afghanistan since the assault began Saturday. Related article: Objectives of the Afghan operation

Speaking to AFP behind the front line in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, a senior Afghan general said troops had captured nearly all the targeted territory in the Marjah and Nad Ali areas of Helmand.

"All of the areas of Marjah and Nad Ali have been taken by combined forces. They are under our control, almost all Nad Ali and Marjah," said General Aminullah Patiani, the senior Afghan commander in Operation Mushtarak.

"The Taliban have left the areas, but the threat from IEDs remains," he said, referring to improvised explosive devices, which have become the biggest killer of NATO troops in

Afghanistan.

In Kabul, General Mohammad Zahir Azimi, the Afghan defence ministry spokesman, told AFP: "Marjah has been almost cleared and our forces are in control.

"There are some small-scale, sporadic firefights. We are mostly busy with clearing the area of IEDs. The operation is nearing its end," he added.

Despite upbeat assessments from Western leaders and military commanders, however, a spokesman for the US Marines urged caution.

"There is still fighting in certain areas of Marjah. We have found very little opposition but there have been a couple of difficult areas where the Marines have met stiff resistance," said Marines spokesman Captain Abe Sipe.

In some villages around Marjah, the Taliban were "standing and holding" and combined forces were under gun and rocket-propelled grenade attack, he said.

An AFP photographer on the outskirts of Marjah said Sunday that troops had advanced painstakingly, coming under Taliban fire and hunting for IEDs, as they sought to reassure residents that they were in the area to stay.

Obama has ordered the deployment of over 50,000 American troops to Afghanistan since taking office in January 2009, with the final reinforcements due to bring to 150,000 the total number of US and NATO-led troops in the country by August.

Western commanders say Mushtarak seeks to implement counter-insurgency tactics drawn up by ground commander General Stanley McChrystal in order to push out militants and pave the way for Afghan sovereignty.

Afghan officials say they have a government-in-waiting ready to sweep in and set up institutional services and security that will ensure the Taliban do not return.

Intrinsic to the strategy is the need to limit civilian casualties in a bid to foster public confidence. The Red Cross has warned that war casualties rose in the build-up to the highly publicised offensive.

NATO on Sunday acknowledged responsibility for the deaths of 12 Afghans who were killed when two rockets missed their target and landed on a compound as troops came under fire in Nad Ali district, where Marjah is located.

McChrystal apologised for the deaths as US national security adviser James Jones said the offensive was going well after the first 24 hours.

British military spokesman Major General Gordon Messenger said British commanders were also "very much of the view this has gone according to plan".

Of the seven NATO soldiers killed in southern Afghanistan since the start of the offensive, at least four have been American and two British.

In a statement released by the Taliban, a commander named Mullah Abdul Rezaq Akhund was quoted condemning the offensive as a public relations stunt "to give some prestige to the defeated and failed military commander... McChrystal".

## **Afghanistan's government seeks more control over elections**

The Washington Post

02/15/2010

By Joshua Partlow

The new draft proposes limiting the number of female members in the Wolesi Jirga.

HERAT - The Afghan government has drafted proposed changes to election law that would remove all three foreign members from the body that investigates fraud, limit the number of women in parliament and establish a host of new qualifications for candidates to run for office.

The thorough rewriting of the 2005 election law has raised the prospect that President Hamid Karzai intends to respond to the chaos of last year's presidential election by imposing changes that would give the government more control over the commission that documented the scope of electoral fraud. The five-member Electoral Complaints Commission -- including three international members appointed by the U.N. envoy to Afghanistan -- calculated that Karzai lost his first-round majority last August by the amount of vote-rigging and would need to face a run-off.

The proposed amendments are spelled out in a translated version of a draft law that was presented at a cabinet meeting earlier this month and obtained by The Washington Post. A spokesman for Karzai, Wahid Omar, said that amendments to the law were approved by the cabinet and sent to the Ministry of Justice but that he could not discuss the content of the changes until they were made public. Karzai could sign the decree as early as this week, while the parliament is on recess.

"People are very worried about this law," said one foreign official in Kabul who works on election issues. "It was so substantially rewritten, and nobody really knew about it."

Karzai has come under international pressure not to sign the decree and to allow for further modification, the officials said. The next round of elections, for parliament, is

scheduled for September.

Although Karzai won in August by default when his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, dropped out before the run-off, the Karzai administration accused the commission of foreign meddling in an Afghan process and suggested that the results were a conspiracy against the government.

"I think the Afghan people didn't have a good experience with the last election with this commission, this complaints commission," said Azizullah Lodin, the president of the Afghan-run Independent Election Commission, who was accused of favoring Karzai during last year's vote.

According to the draft proposal, the new Electoral Complaints Commission would have no foreign members appointed by the United Nations. One member would be chosen by the Supreme Court, two by the parliament, one by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and one by the president.

In addition to changing the commission, the draft proposes limiting the number of female members in the lower house of the legislature, known as the Wolesi Jirga, to a maximum of two per each of the country's 34 provinces. The current law stipulates that the number of female representatives must be at least twice the number of provinces. While there is some dispute about the interpretation of this amendment, one international official in Kabul said it would "substantially reduce" the number of women in the 249-member lower house of parliament.

The draft also proposes a series of requirements to run for president, including having a bachelor's degree and a "good reputation" and being a "wise and brave person" who has not been "affected by psychic diseases." Presidential candidates would also have to deposit 5 million afghanis (about \$100,000), which would be refunded only if the candidate wins or receives at least 20 percent of the vote. Of the 32 presidential candidates listed by the election commission in the final results of last year's vote, only two cleared this threshold.

"It seems quite discriminatory," Hakim said. "It would be a good opportunity for warlords and drug lords and mafia to be the most likely candidates."

## **Arab Fighters Gunned Down in Helmand**

Written by Barialay Rahimi  
Tuesday, 16 February 2010 12:40

A local Taliban commander and four Arab insurgents were killed Monday in an airstrike in Helmand province, an official said.

The Taliban commander described as a facilitator to foreign insurgents in Helmand's Washir district, north of Nad Ali, a key Taliban bastion where a major anti-Taliban offensive enters its fourth day.

Serajuddin, a key Taliban commander, and four Arab insurgents associated to the Taliban were killed in an airstrike in Washir, said Daud Ahmadi, spokesman for Helmand Governor.

Commander Serajuddin was a Taliban district chief in Helmand's neighbouring province of Farah during the Taliban regime that was toppled in a US-led invasion in 2001.

A purported Taliban spokesman, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, said no Taliban operatives were killed in Washir and he characterised the deaths as civilians.

Nearly 15,000 Afghan and NATO forces launched their biggest offensive since the collapse of the Taliban in Helmand, targeting Nad Ali and Marjah -- key Taliban strongholds and a hub for Afghan heroin production.

Afghan and NATO officials claim to have cleared a major part of the two districts, acknowledging improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have hampered the operation -- dubbed as Operation Moshtarak.

## **Afghans Suspect Foreign Hand in Poll Delay**

Institute for War & Peace Reporting  
By Shapoor Saber in Herat (ARR No. 353, 19-Feb-10)

Postponement of general election viewed with suspicion by ordinary people and analysts.

A decision to postpone Afghanistan's parliamentary election by four months to September has been greeted with dismay by Afghans who think it is a breach of the constitution and has been imposed by foreign powers.

The Independent Election Commission, IEC, announced on January 24 that the poll would take place on September 18 instead of May 22 as required by the constitution.

Although the IEC cited a lack of funds and poor security and logistics as the reasons behind the postponement, many Afghan people and political experts do not believe it.

IEC spokesman Nur Mohammad, asked about these doubts, said, "We respect the people's opinion, but we are determined to hold the election in accordance [with] national and international standards."

The director of the IEC in Herat province, Zia Ahmad Zia, said he does not see the postponement as a violation of the constitution and believes the commission has the necessary authority to decide the date.

A spokesman for the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, UNAMA, Nazifollah Salarzai, told a news conference in Kabul that UNAMA will not provide any assistance for the parliamentary election unless basic reforms take place within the IEC.

Another UNAMA spokesman, Halim Sediq, stressed the need for reform of the IEC, telling the news conference, "We want a transparent commission so that we will have a transparent parliamentary election, unlike the presidential election."

He was referring to last year's re-election of President Hamed Karzai after a vote that was widely seen as tainted by electoral fraud as well as a lack of security and a low voter turnout.

Mohammed made clear international criticism of that poll and demands for the commission to be purged of those who tolerated corruption have sunk in.

"After the presidential and provincial council election, the commission conducted some reforms which caused 6,000 election workers to be blacklisted by the commission. Besides, directors of the IEC in four provinces - Kandahar, Nangarhar, Ghazni and Paktika - have been removed and the reform is still in process. Meanwhile, some provincial and central workers of the commission have been suspended," he said.

He added that the commission would in future only hire individuals who are committed to the principles of the IEC, "The election commission of Afghanistan accepts and welcomes preconditions and suggestions that are necessary for reform and improvement of the process."

Karzai won the president election when his challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, withdrew from the race after Karzai rejected his demands for action against the IEC, including removing its director, Azizollah Ludin.

The suspicion that foreign powers lie behind the postponement of the election is rooted in Afghanistan's colonial past and the view that other countries have always interfered. Such countries – usually not named – want everything in Afghanistan to be organised in way that suits their interests, people believe.

The United States and Britain are the leading contributors of troops to the International Security Assistance Force, the UN-established, NATO-led security and development mission.

Nasir Ahmad Lotfi, a resident of the western province of Herat, believes that foreign powers do not respect the laws of Afghanistan, "[The postponement] has been done by [them], because they want to send individuals to the parliament who will do their bidding. They want to achieve their aims this way.

"The support of some western countries for the postponement of the parliamentary election shows their level of respect for the Afghan constitution."

Homayun Azizi, a former speaker of the provincial council in Herat, told IWPR, "Some western countries present in Afghanistan want to create a weak and semi-legitimate parliament the same as they have created a weak government. The state will be forced to accept whatever the foreigners want until they have achieved their goals."

Others are critical of the authorities for the election delay.

Golsum Sediqi, director of a women lawyers association in western Afghanistan, says officials cannot expect people and institutions to respect the constitution and other laws anymore, because they have violated the law by delaying the ballot.

"Breaking the law by officials has caused great damage to the government, because it means the Taleban, which is the biggest opposition group and itself violates the constitution, has achieved its goal. The government will not be able to tell the opposition to accept the constitution anymore, because the government itself has broken the law. Now, the government should not expect the Taleban to agree with it."

Basir Begzad, who is standing in the parliamentary election for Herat province, also questions the commission's stated reasons for the postponement and says it amounts to a flagrant breach of the constitution.

"The election commission is to blame in this regard, because it has not been able to fulfil the demands of the international community, which has caused the international community to stop cooperation with the commission," he said.

Mohammad Rafiq Shahir, a director of the Experts' Council in Herat province, says Karzai is mainly to blame for the postponement.

"First, President Hamed Karzai violated the law during the second presidential election of Afghanistan which promoted the culture of violation of the law in the country ... he wants to place individuals in the future parliament who agree with his decisions," he said.

Herat journalist Wali Mohammad Hadid believes the president imposed the delay in order to organise the parliamentary election to suit himself. He also feels Karzai will oppose the removal of senior IEC officials.

"High-ranking commission officials have done a great service during the presidential election for Hamed Karzai. Karzai does not want to remove them from their positions.

For this reason, he postponed the election so that he will be able to hold the election the way he wishes," he said.

Asked about the allegations against the president, Siamak Herawi, his deputy spokesman, said, "The claims made by ordinary people and analysts are their own opinions and democracy gives them the chance to express their views but they are not based on the truth. The truth was the lack of budget, bad security and other problems caused the elections to be delayed.

"The president has never interfered in the work of the electoral commission and has respected the decisions made by the commission. The president has always been independent and has never been influenced by foreigners in making decisions.

"We faced many problems in the past [presidential] elections due to the interference by foreigners. In the upcoming [parliamentary] elections foreigners will be given the right to act only as observers and they will not be given any right to interfere in our electoral affairs."

## **Afghan challenger Abdullah touts new coalition**

Fri Feb 19, 12:41 pm ET

PARIS (AFP) – Afghan President Hamid Karzai's top political rival on Friday announced the launch of a new coalition to fight for a multi-party system in September's parliamentary election.

"This movement... will be hopefully a new chapter in political life in Afghanistan," said Abdullah Abdullah, the popular presidential challenger in last year's election, announcing his "Coalition for Change and Hope".

"So far the importance of political parties and political movements have been ignored, or obstacles were created," he said, addressing a conference in Paris during a visit on which he was to meet with French politicians.

Abdullah deprived Karzai of outright victory in August's vote but then declined to stand in a second round after massive voting fraud.

Afghanistan last month pushed back the date of the parliamentary vote by four months amid corruption concerns and a fierce insurgency by the Taliban, the Islamist movement ousted by a US-led invasion in 2001.

Abdullah said the new movement would unite various deputies and political parties "throughout" Afghanistan with an agenda including electoral reform and "a more decentralised system" of government for the country.

"We have laid the foundations... It's just the start," he said.

"We have already a bloc of MPs in the current parliament, over 50 people, that will hopefully change in the upcoming parliament with some transparency in the process."

Abdullah said the international community had a role to play to "push" for free and fair elections in September.

In Afghanistan meanwhile a major assault by Afghan, NATO and US forces on militants in the southern province of Helmand entered its seventh day on Friday.

Abdullah said the offensive would only succeed if the allied forces won over civilians. "Militarily it could be a success but... success means we have people on our side."

He described as "a positive step" the arrest this week of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, said to be the second-in-command of the Afghan Taliban, but warned: "There are many like him."

## **General Sees Positives in Afghan Army Training**

United States Department of Defense

By Ian Graham  
Special to American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 19, 2010 – Though training an Afghan army essentially from the ground up has been a difficult undertaking, an Army general involved in the effort said yesterday that he's seeing positive results.

Army Maj. Gen. David Hogg, deputy commander of NATO Training Mission Afghanistan, spoke about the status of the Afghan army, as well as challenges and plans for its training, during a "DoDLive" bloggers roundtable.

More than 17,000 Afghan recruits are in basic training at regional training centers that instruct 1,400 recruits at a time. The Afghan army also has an officer candidate school and a noncommissioned officer education program, including a sergeants major academy.

The Afghan army currently has about 104,000 troops, and officials expect to have 134,000 soldiers by the end of October, Hogg said.

“When we throw in our other schools from the NCO and the officers’ side, counterinsurgency [and the] command and general staff college, we’ve got a total of almost 20,000 Afghan army folks in training right now,” Hogg said.

Afghanistan also has a military academy established – 213 cadets will graduate March 16. On March 22, a new class of 600 cadets will begin the four-year program.

“They’ll graduate, and every year we’ll start cranking out brand-new lieutenants from the military academy,” Hogg said.

Recruiting has been on the upswing, Hogg said. In December, the Afghan army recruited 8,800 soldiers, twice what the Afghans ever had recruited previously. Part of that, he explained, is a matter of the season; winter and fall typically are high recruiting times in Afghanistan.

“The real test on whether or not the Afghans can make the numbers is going to start happening probably in the April-May time frame,” he said. “When we hit the spring [and] summer, we’ll see how that goes. But right now, the Afghans are saying they’re going to make their numbers.”

So far, the general said, they have. “We’re ‘bursting at the seams’ for training,” he said.

Because of that success, Hogg said, there’s the challenge of the training infrastructure undergoing stress. But the bigger issue, he explained, is getting the infrastructure and recruits to train leaders. A four-year program, he said, can provide good training, but it can’t teach the skills and experience required to command an army.

“Developing leaders, that is a big deal,” Hogg said. “It’s a main effort for us, both in the officer and NCO corps. It takes awhile to build leaders, and so we’re working that very hard, but it’s a challenge.”

Challenges also exist in the Afghan army’s logistical system – the infrastructure simply isn’t there yet, Hogg said. Personnel issues -- including establishing an effective military pay system -- have been a problem as well.

Afghan military officials also have some difficulty rotating soldiers out of combat to teach soldiers from their experiences. Hogg likened the latter issue to a problem the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command is experiencing.

“We have the same challenges here as far as getting folks out of the fight into the training environment,” Hogg said. “And what we’re trying to do is get the Afghans to rotate fresh with combat experience and get combat experience in the training center.”

Less-visible training initiatives in Afghanistan, Hogg said, include the commando training programs and Afghan army air corps instruction. The commandos are trained

similarly to U.S. Army Rangers, and typically are partnered with Special Forces units as they train.

“[Special Forces units] will go through the training with the Afghans, and then they will deploy to their operational area -- wherever that [unit] is designed to go,” Hogg said. “And so that partnering piece really makes a difference as far as the quality of the force.”

The commandos also get special equipment, such as night-vision devices, Hogg said.

The air corps, Hogg said, already is assisting in operations in Afghanistan’s Helmand province. They currently use Russian Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters and T-27A cargo aircraft, essentially a miniature version of the C-130 Hercules. Though Hogg said he expects the Mi-35s to be phased out in lieu of better equipment, he expects to get more Mi-17s, totaling 56 when the air corps’ training program is operating at 100 percent.

“It takes awhile to grow pilots, and they are currently in training,” Hogg said. “We don’t see those really going operational, if you will, probably until this summer, just on the fact that we need to have the training base.”

In spite of challenges, Hogg is confident the training programs under way will help the Afghan army immensely. He said the commitment of the Afghans is clear, and that’s key to the mission’s success.

“This is much more complicated than anything I saw in Iraq the year I was [in Iraq],” Hogg said. “But we are getting the trainers that we need. ... The Afghans are getting it. If you look at the casualty rates for the Afghan soldiers and the Afghan police, there is no doubt in my mind that they are committed to their country.

“I mean, they’re out there fighting, and they are dying, and they are being wounded right along with our soldiers,” he added. “And so we will continue this mission.”

## **Afghan president slams civilian deaths by US-led force**

Sat, 20 Feb 2010 15:14:35 GMT  
Press TV

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has once again criticized foreign troops for killing civilians in the new US-led operations against militants.

"We need to reach the point where there are no civilian casualties," Karzai told lawmakers during the opening session of the parliament following a-month-long break.

"Our effort and our criticism will continue until we reach that goal," he said.

The Afghan president held up a picture of an 8-year-old girl whose entire family was killed during the offensive in the southern town of Marjah.

"If a little girl is to collect the dead bodies of family members, you can guess in what situation we are in now," Karzai noted.

NATO reported earlier that its troops killed yet another civilian, claiming that the Afghan civilian was shot dead by mistake.

The alliance says that 16 civilians have been killed since the massive operation started a week ago.

Ahead of the offensive, the Afghan government had cautioned the foreign troops against causing civilian casualties.

Many Afghan civilians have been killed both by violent militant acts, including bombings and daily fighting, as well as by US military operations in the country.

Meanwhile, Karzai urged Taliban militants once again to put down their guns and join the Afghan government.

"I once again call on Taliban ... to come back and take part in peace, reconstruction and developments of their country," he said.

However, the Taliban have so far rejected the offer, arguing that Karzai's peace offer was prompted by the militants' spreading influence.

NATO has said in a statement that the goal of the US-led offensive is to coerce Taliban into joining the Afghan government.

## **Holbrooke Says Tajikistan Important For Outcome In Afghanistan**

February 20, 2010

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

(RFE/RL) -- U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke said in Dushanbe today that Tajikistan was "a country of immense importance if one wants to have a peaceful outcome in Afghanistan," RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

Speaking with reporters after meeting with President Emomali Rahmon, the U.S. envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan said Tajikistan was important for "ethnic and geographic and strategic reasons."

Holbrooke also said the greatest danger to regional stability came not from the Taliban but from Al-Qaeda's use of regional sanctuaries to train terrorists.

"I think the real threat in this region is less from the Taliban than from Al-Qaeda, which wants to train international terrorists, but that is an issue of common concern to the United States and to all the countries of this region, and by all the countries I definitely include Pakistan and China and India," Holbrooke said.

Holbrooke added that he and Rahmon "talked especially about energy and water and about Tajikistan's capabilities to help deal with the water crisis in other parts of the region, especially Pakistan and India."

The U.S. envoy's stop in Tajikistan, which shares a 1,340-kilometer border with Afghanistan, is part of a tour of Central Asia that began earlier on February 17.

On February 19, Holbrooke met with Uzbek President Islam Karimov for talks on Afghanistan, and he also met with Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev.

with agency reports

## **Reconciliation, a Need for Afghanistan: Karzai**

Written by Quqnoos.com

Saturday, 20 February 2010 16:05

President Karzai called on the Taliban on Saturday to accept his peace deal

President Hamid Karzai, in a re-opening ceremony of Afghan parliament after the winter break, renewed his approach to the Taliban to lay down their arms.

"I once again call on Taliban and other opposition groups... to come back and take part in peace, reconstruction and developments of their country," Karzai told lawmakers.

Talks to Taliban leadership are deemed to be more flexible after US and Pakistani spies captured top Taliban leader, Mullah Baradar, and two other Taliban leaders in Pakistan.

At a conference on Afghanistan in London in January, donor nations backed Karzai's plans for peace talks and pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to persuade fighters to lay down weapons.

Taliban insurgents have repeatedly turned down his offer, pre-conditioning the withdrawal of foreign troops to any negotiations with Kabul government.

"Our nation, more than anything else needs peace and reconciliation. This is our country's prime desire and national necessity."

Karzai said the Afghan and NATO-led forces would continue to fight Al Qaeda and those affiliated to Osama Bin Laden's network.

## **Afghanistan Upper House chief resigns**

KABUL, Feb. 20 (Xinhua) -- Sibghatullah Mujadadi, the chief of Afghanistan's Mushrano Jirga or Upper House of parliament, rendered his resignation on Saturday. "I am rendering my resignation to the president and the nation and requesting his Excellency the President to approve it," Mujadadi announced at the joint session of parliament resumed after winter vacation.

Citing ignoring his advices for the decision, Mujadadi, without giving further details, said, "Three or four months before I rendered my resignation."

Mujadadi made this announcement in the presence of President Hamid Karzai while he was asked to pray and conclude the session.

## **Abdullah slams Karzai's Taliban peace offer**

Sun, 21 Feb 2010 08:58:57 GMT

The Afghan president's main rival in last year's elections has expressed doubt about the success of the government's US-backed offer of peace with the Taliban.

“I don't think that they know what they are talking about,” Abdullah Abdullah said on Saturday, noting that Karzai's peace-at-any-price plan is "very vague."

"Sometimes they give the perception that if everything is being done in order to reconcile tomorrow with the Taliban there will be peace," added Abdullah.

He added that the developments could only lead to some minor peace deals at local levels.

Abdullah went on to explain that although the ongoing US-led military offensive could push some low-ranking Taliban militants to join peace talks, permanent victory depends on how civilians living in the area are treated.

“Militarily it could be a success but lasting success means that we have the people on our side. That's winning the hearts and minds of the people and that's the job of the Afghan government. So what sort of system replaces what was going on there, that's important."

He also blamed Pakistan for jeopardizing security in Afghanistan, saying Islamabad is a main supporter of the Taliban.

Abdullah's comments came weeks after President Hamid Karzai proposed a US backed plan to talk militants into the country's political structure. He hoped this would end the violence in Afghanistan.

The Taliban has repeatedly turned down the offer, demanding foreign forces leave the war-torn country first.

## **Thousands trapped in Afghan assault zone**

AFP

02/21/2010

By

People have little access to food, medicine: rights group

KABUL - People living on the front line of a major U.S.-led offensive against Taliban militants in southern Afghanistan are trapped in their homes with little access to food and health care, rights groups say.

Hundreds more who fled the area before fighting began over a week ago are receiving

little help in harsh winter conditions, they add.

"We are seriously worried about the safety of civilians, especially in the Marjah area," said Ajmal Samadi, head of the independent group Afghan Rights Monitor (ARM).

"People who are ill cannot get to hospitals, and others cannot bring them medicines. They cannot get food, or even go outside to look after their farms."

He added that food prices were rising due to the assault and people with medical needs -- from war wounds to pregnancy -- were largely unable to get treatment.

The assault on the Marjah and Nad Ali districts of Helmand province launched on Feb. 13 is being held up by snipers and innumerable crude bombs planted by Taliban fighters, commanders say.

The aim of the operation, dubbed Mushtarak (Together), is to drive Taliban from the area in the central Helmand River valley, where they have held sway with drug traffickers for at least two years.

The Afghan government aims firstly to re-establish sovereignty, then provide security, clinics, schools and jobs.

Mushtarak is a test of U.S. President Barack Obama's new counter-insurgency strategy, aimed at winning the trust of the population and neutralizing the Taliban.

Little regards

NATO and Afghan leaders have said they hatched the assault in close cooperation with each other so the military phase can be immediately followed by the establishment of civil administration and services.

But Norine MacDonald, president of London-based think tank the International Council for Security and Development, which has an office in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, said planners had paid little regard to civilian well-being.

"The forward planning we heard so much about did not include ensuring that the local population would be able to leave and live elsewhere in decent conditions, with access to food and medical care," she said.

More than 2,800 families -- averaging about five members each -- had been displaced before and during the fighting, said Abdul Rahman Hutaki, head of the Human Rights and Environment Organization, an independent Afghan group.

"Conditions for the displaced are deteriorating and sufficient assistance is not getting through," he said.

2,000 families

Provincial authorities say 2,000 displaced families are in Lashkar Gah, receiving help from Afghan and international charities.

But Marjah resident Ahmad Jan, speaking by telephone, said: "Since I came to Lashkar Gah, I haven't received any assistance".

Ghulam Farooq Noorzai, Helmand's director for refugees' affairs, said food and winter clothing had been distributed to 1,400 families.

The 200-square-kilometre (80-square-mile) target zone has been strewn with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) -- on roads, in fields, hanging from trees, even plastered into the walls of homes, commanders say.

Marjah resident Abdul Ghias, 53, told AFP by telephone the IEDs made it impossible to move in or out of the township, adding: "Most people cannot get hold of medicine or food, and people cannot work in their farms."

NATO commanders say it could be another three weeks before the area is under control as fighting between militants and the 15,000-strong force of U.S. Marines, NATO and Afghan troops is proving "difficult".

In the meantime, people caught in crossfire, shot as Taliban human shields, or injured by bombs face difficulties getting treatment.

The International Committee of the Red Cross says it has the only medical facility in Marjah, a first aid station manned by five people.

Lashkar Gah, where there are two hospitals, is 20 kilometers (12 miles) away by the shortest route, said Bijan Farnoudi, Red Cross spokesman in Kabul.

But the roads are so heavily mined, few are willing to make the journey and alternative routes can take up to seven hours, if anyone dares use them, he said.

## **Dutch troops 'to leave Afghanistan as planned' - PM**

BBC

02/21/2010

A day after his cabinet collapsed, the Dutch prime minister says he expects Dutch troops to end their mission in Afghanistan in August as expected.

"If nothing else will take its place, then it ends," Jan Peter Balkenende told Dutch television.

The cabinet fell after the two largest parties failed to agree on a Nato request to extend the tour of the almost 2,000-strong Dutch contingent.

A Nato spokesman said it would provide support to Afghans whatever happened.

The uncertainty over their deployment comes as Nato, US and Afghan forces are engaged in a large military offensive against the Taliban in neighbouring Helmand.

The governor of Uruzgan province said peace and reconstruction efforts would suffer a setback if the Dutch left.

Asadullah Hamdam told the BBC they were playing a vital role building roads, training the Afghan police and providing security for civilians.

"If they withdraw and leave these projects incomplete, then they will leave a big vacuum," he added.

Dutch troops have been stationed in Afghanistan since 2006.

They should have returned home in 2008, but their deployment was extended by two years because no other Nato member state offered replacements.

In October, the Dutch parliament voted that the deployment must definitely end by August 2010.

Mr Balkenende's government had not endorsed that vote, and the finance minister and leader of the Labour Party, Wouter Bos, demanded an immediate ruling from the prime minister.

When they failed to reach a compromise during marathon talks that continued into the early hours of Saturday, Labour said it was pulling out of the coalition.

Later, Mr Balkenende said there was no common ground and offered his cabinet's resignation to Queen Beatrix by telephone.

Deadly place

The launch in 2001 of Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) for Afghanistan was the organisation's first and largest ground operation outside Europe.

As of October 2009, Isaf had more than 71,000 personnel from 42 different countries including the US, Canada, European countries, Australia, Jordan and New Zealand.

The US provides the bulk of foreign forces in Afghanistan, and President Barack Obama has announced an extra 30,000 American troops for Afghanistan.

The Pentagon has said the next 18 months could prove crucial for the international mission in Afghanistan, after more than eight years of efforts to stabilise the country.

Afghanistan remains a deadly place for foreign forces.

Suicide attacks on Afghan civilians and roadside bomb strikes on international troops are common, with the Taliban strongly resurgent in many areas of the country.

## **Dutch exit could leave key Afghan area vulnerable**

The Associated Press  
02/21/2010

KABUL - The likely exit of Dutch troops from Afghanistan leaves a key province in the heart of the nation vulnerable to Taliban infiltration - especially if militants are pushed out of their sanctuaries in the south.

The departure of the Netherlands and Canada, which plans to remove its 2,800 troops from the country next year, could prompt other nations in the NATO alliance to rethink their commitment to the eight-year-old war. And it underscores the difficulty President Barack Obama faces in keeping the international contingent intact.

The Dutch serve in Uruzgan province, an area well-known to several insurgent commanders, including Taliban kingpin Mullah Mohammed Omar, who once was a cleric in the Dihrawud district. Moreover, Uruzgan borders Helmand province where 15,000 U.S., Afghan and NATO forces have been fighting insurgents for control of the town of Marjah.

"We need the Dutch force in Uruzgan. The Dutch are very active in reconstruction, and strengthening the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police," Uruzgan's provincial Gov. Asadullah Hamdam told The Associated Press on Sunday.

"If they leave the country, we will have more difficulties in Uruzgan," said Hamdam, who worries that Taliban fighters being pushed out of Marjah will move north to his province. "The Afghan army and police are not enough. ... Our force is still not standing

on their own feet. We are requesting the Dutch to stay."

The bulk of Australia's 1,500 troops in Afghanistan are based in Uruzgan doing reconstruction work and training Afghan security forces, but Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said Sunday his country has no plans to fill the vacuum if the Dutch withdraw.

"In the absence of the Dutch, Australia has made it clear to NATO and to the international security assistance forces that Australia is not in a position to take up the lead in Uruzgan province," Smith told reporters in Perth, Australia. "We've made this clear to NATO, as we have the United States.

"So it's a matter for NATO to resolve the leadership issues in Uruzgan province and we're confident that particular issue is in hand."

There are more than 44,000 non-U.S. troops from NATO and partner countries in Afghanistan, compared with more than 74,000 Americans.

Even as the U.S. pours in 30,000 more soldiers, most European nations - including France and Germany - have been reluctant to substantially boost their troop levels, limiting their contributions mainly to instructors for the Afghan army and police.

Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi said he is counting on the NATO commitment to stay in Afghanistan until Afghan security forces can assume responsibility for some provinces in two or three years. But he stressed that the NATO commitment was not hinged on one country.

"This is an internal issue between NATO and the Netherlands," he said.

The Dutch government was bitterly divided over the nation's presence in Afghanistan where 21 Dutch soldiers have died, including the son of a Dutch military commander, Gen. Peter van Uhm. The issue boiled over this weekend when Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende said that despite a marathon cabinet session, he could not bridge differences with the Labor Party, which rejected a NATO request to extend the Dutch deployment beyond August - the current date set for their withdrawal.

Without the support of the Labor Party, Balkenende's government collapsed. New elections are expected in the spring, but it will take months for a new government to be formed. Balkenende said Sunday his country's 1,600 troops would probably leave Afghanistan this year.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen "continues to believe that the best way forward would be a new smaller Dutch mission, including a provincial reconstruction team in Uruzgan, to consolidate the success that the Dutch have had, and to transition to Afghan lead," said NATO spokesman James Appathurai in Brussels.

He said NATO won't intervene in any nation's discussion about its troop presence in Afghanistan "but we certainly want to keep this as a team effort," Appathurai said.

Gen. Juma Gul Himat, police chief in Uruzgan province, said if the Dutch troops leave, the Afghan security forces will manage, but they need more equipment, training, air support and economic development - and fast. "Poverty is deep," he said.

The security situation remains volatile in Uruzgan, Himat said, noting that 67 Afghan policemen have been killed and hundreds of others wounded in the province in the past 12 months.

"We are planning to deploy more forces on the border of Helmand and Uruzgan," he said. "We need training, mine detection equipment and helicopters."

## **Dutch hesitancy doesn't faze NATO occupiers**

Sun, 21 Feb 2010 00:08:59 GMT

NATO says its troops will stay in Afghanistan as long as necessary despite the uncertain future of Dutch troops in the Central Asian nation.

"NATO will stay as long as necessary. That is a very clear commitment. The Dutch decision is for the Dutch to take, and we will not interfere with that," NATO spokesman James Appathurai told the BBC on Saturday.

"We have invested a lot in Afghanistan. We will continue to invest in Afghanistan because it is an investment in our own security," he added.

He made the remarks after the Dutch government collapsed over disagreements over whether to extend the country's military mission in Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende announced the news on Saturday following a 16-hour cabinet meeting.

Christian Democrat Balkenende was considering a NATO request to extend the deployment of Dutch troops in Afghanistan beyond 2010, but now a decision on the issue cannot be made until new elections are held.

The Labor party — a key member of the ruling center-left coalition — had opposed the extension and finally left the government over the dispute.

This was Balkenende's fourth government in eight years. His three previous cabinets also collapsed before their mandates expired.

Around 2000 Dutch troops are currently deployed in Afghanistan. The Netherlands' Afghan mission, which started in 2006, has already been extended by two years.

21 Dutch soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan.

## **Taliban reject renewed Karzai call for peace**

Reuters

02/21/2010

By Sayed Salahuddin

KABUL - Afghanistan's Taliban on Sunday rejected President Hamid Karzai's latest call for peace, despite pressure from a NATO offensive and the capture of its number 2.

Karzai renewed his appeal in parliament on Saturday for the Taliban to accept his peace proposal.

At a conference on Afghanistan in London in January, donor nations backed his plans for peace talks with those militants who renounce violence and pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to persuade fighters to lay down weapons.

The Taliban have repeatedly turned down Karzai's peace proposals, saying foreign troops should leave Afghanistan first, but some tentative "talks about talks" have taken place.

"Karzai is a puppet he cannot represent a nation or a government," said Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf, commenting on Karzai's call for the Taliban to work for peace and reconstruction.

"He is bogged down in corruption and is surrounded by warlords who are making themselves rich."

The Taliban, who have made a steady comeback since being ousted after a 2001 U.S.-led invasion, are under pressure.

### **HEAT ON TALIBAN**

Three senior Taliban officials were captured in Pakistan this month, including the group's number 2 and top military commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar -- the highest profile Taliban leader to be grabbed.

NATO is pushing ahead with one of its largest assaults in Afghanistan since the start of the war, aimed at driving the Taliban from their last big stronghold in the country's most violent province to make way for Afghan authorities to take over.

Taliban fighters remain defiant, digging in for a fight to the death against an assault that tests U.S. President Barack Obama's strategy of sending 30,000 more troops to seize insurgent-held areas before a planned 2011 troop drawdown begins.

"In Marjah, determined resistance is again reported in some areas. The Regional Command-South commander believes the clearing phase is progressing well and will take at least 30 days to complete," said the International Security Assistance Force.

The resilience of the Taliban has raised questions about how long Western countries can afford to stick it out in Afghanistan.

Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende's coalition government collapsed on Saturday when the two largest parties failed to agree on whether to withdraw troops from Afghanistan this year as planned.

The fall of the government in the EU country, just two days short of the coalition's third anniversary, all but guarantees that the 2,000 Dutch troops will be brought home this year.

That would be the first major crack in the coalition of some 40 nations battling a steadily increasing Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

Yousuf questioned how 15,000 NATO and Afghan troops with air support could not sweep through Marjah, the focus of the offensive, in Helmand province in the south.

"Our resistance is going on unabatedly day and night. They (troops) are facing resistance in all corners of Marjah, he said.

NATO says 12 of its troops have died in the fighting since the offensive started eight days ago. Yousuf said the Taliban have lost 14 fighters.

### **Rocket attack kills Afghan woman, wounds 3 others in E Afghanistan**

KABUL, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- A rocket attack launched by insurgents has claimed the life of a woman and injured three others in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, said a press release of the Interior Ministry issued here on Sunday.

"Four rockets fired by insurgents landed at Sorkhrod district yesterday evening, one of them hit a residential area, killing an innocent woman and injuring three other civilians," the press release said.

Investigation has been initiated into the case to identify the culprits, it said.

"Taliban militants who staged a violent comeback four years ago have vowed to speed up their activities this year against the Afghan government and NATO-led forces stationed in the post- Taliban country.

## **'CIA Seeks Baradar's Transfer to Bagram'**

Quqnoos / February 21, 2010

CIA wants Pakistan to extradite the Taliban's second-in command Mullah Baradar to Bagram prison for interrogation

Senior US officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told media persons that Washington is not satisfied with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar's interrogation and wants to take charge.

"CIA Director Leon Panetta and other officials have proposed moving Mullah Baradar to the US-run prison at the Bagram Air Base north of Kabul," Pakistani newspaper, The Dawn quoted a report in the US media, as saying.

Mullah Baradar, the most senior Taliban commander to arrest since the collapse of the regime, was captured about ten days ago by Pakistani and US spies in Karachi.

The reports came just hours after Pakistan Interior Minister Rahman Malik said that Baradar would not be handed over the US in any case.

Malik said Pakistani agencies would first investigate Baradar's links with the banned terrorist network, and could hand him over to Afghanistan if the need arises but not to the US.

"First we will see whether they have violated any law. If they have done it, then the law will take its own course against them, but at the most if they have not done anything, then they will go back to the country of origin, not to the US," Malik said.

According to some reports the CIA had denied direct access to Mullah Baradar for about two weeks after his arrest, and had since worked alongside Pakistani interrogators who continued to control the questioning.

## **Third NATO soldier dies in 24 hours**

Press TV / February 21, 2010

NATO announced Sunday that another foreign soldier has been killed in Afghanistan, where foreign forces have launched a major offensive against the Taliban.

The soldier lost his life to a makeshift bomb in southern Afghanistan, becoming the third service member to be killed in the war-torn country since Saturday.

According to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) two other soldiers were killed on Saturday, one in the country's east and the other in the south.

However, neither of the service members killed were involved in 'Operation Moshtarak' — allegedly the biggest anti-Taliban offensive since the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

The latest fatalities bring the number of foreign troops reported killed to 25 since the February 13 launch of 'Operation Moshtarak' (Together) against militants in the Marjah and Nad Ali areas of the southern Helmand Province.

Half of them have been killed as a direct result of the operation, which is aimed at ridding Helmand of militants.

ISAF did not give the nationality of any of the soldiers.

## **Operation on Taliban slows down in minefields in S Afghanistan**

By Abdul Hadi Mayar

KABUL, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- As Operation Moshtarak, or Together, launched by the NATO-led troops and Afghan forces entered into its second week on Saturday, Major General Nick Carter, the British commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan, said his forces face stiff resistance in parts of Marjah.

The operation, launched after the announcement of the new United States strategy on Afghanistan, was described, by the Western media, as test of the new U.S.-NATO policy against the insurgent Taliban.

Apart from political, economic and diplomatic steps, the new strategy envisages military action against the hardcore and irreconcilable Taliban fighters.

For the purpose, the U.S. has announced to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan.

Besides, several NATO member-states have also promised to increase the number of their troops in the war-ravaged country.

The operation in Marjah, a Taliban controlled town in the southern Helmand province, was deliberately propagated on media to force the Taliban into receding from the town without any bloodshed.

However, the ensuing events showed that the militants are firmly entrenched in the town and they are offering stiff resistance. "The war is still raging in the same areas where it had been started," Taliban spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi told media on Friday.

Rather, he claimed success, saying that the Taliban had killed dozens of troops and destroyed several tanks.

His claim may certainly be exaggerating, aimed to browbeat the enemy, but the slow progress in the operation itself speaks volume of the difficulties, which the U.S.-led NATO forces are facing in the area.

Marjah is a small town of some 80,000 people and an area of several square kilometers. Major General Nick Carter says the coalition forces would need 25 to 30 days to secure the area.

Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson, commander of the U.S. Marines in Marjah, said Thursday that the coalition forces have taken control of the main roads, bridges and government centers in Marjah.

However, the firing intensified near the center of town on Saturday as the Taliban insurgents tried to close in on U.S. marines.

A NATO statement said that the fighting remained difficult in the northeast and west of Marjah.

Operation Moshtarak is the biggest military campaign against Taliban since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan.

NATO claims that it has killed dozens of Taliban militants and arrested a number of others against its loss of 12 soldiers and 16 civilians.

The operation is aimed at securing the area and rushing in a civilian administration after restoring public services and pouring in aid to try to win the loyalty of the population and prevent the Taliban from returning.

Helmand administration says it plans to deploy 1,000 police personnel to restore the central government's writ in the town.

The recently held London Conference had envisaged handing over Afghanistan district-by-district to the Afghan security forces from the middle of this year so that the international forces are able to begin their withdrawal in July 2011.

Claiming that Operation Moshtarak is the commencement of Taliban's melting down, the international coalition forces say that the resistance in Marjah is scattered and it lacks coordination.

However, spokesman for Helmand's provincial administration Daud Ahmadi claims to the contrary, saying the Taliban fighters are offering strong resistance, adding that only around 40 Taliban fighters have so far been killed.

Claims and counter-claims of the belligerent sides apart, the fact remains that the operation is confronted with serious difficulties, mainly caused by the mines and IEDs (improvised explosive devices) laid by the Taliban around the town.

## **Operation on Taliban just the beginning: top U.S. commander**

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- The joint Afghan-NATO assault against Taliban bastion in southern Afghanistan is just the beginning of a long campaign, which may last up to 18 months, a top U.S. commander said on Sunday.

"This is just the initial operation of what will be a 12 to 18- month campaign as General McChrystal and his team mapped it out," David Petraeus, head of the U.S. Central Command, told NBC television's "Meet the Press" program.

Operation Moshtarak or Together, with the involvement of 15,000 Afghan and the NATO-led troops including 5,000 U.S. Marines, was launched a week ago against the Taliban bastion in Marjah district of southern Helmand province to restore government's authority there.

"We spent the last year getting the inputs right in Afghanistan, getting the structure and organizations necessary for a comprehensive civil military campaign, putting the best leaders we can find in charge of those," said Petraeus.

The operation was seen as a major test of U.S. President Barack Obama's new strategy on Afghanistan, which calls for sending 30, 000 more troops to the country and starting pulling out U.S. forces in July 2011.

## **Helmand elders want US-led forces out**

Press TV / February 21, 2010

Tribal elders in the southern Afghan province of Helmand want an end to the US-led anti-Taliban offensive there, citing Western troops' disregard for civilian lives as a reason.

In a gathering in the center of Helmand, the elders expressed concerns about the way the operations have been handled so far.

Recently many Afghan civilians have been killed both by violent militant acts, including bombings and daily fighting, as well as by new US-led operations against militants.

They say the offensive is taking its toll on the people in the central city of Marjah.

The elders warned that if help doesn't reach people, the region is will face a catastrophe.

Human rights groups have also voiced concern over the issue, saying people living on the front line of the major offensive are trapped in their homes with little access to food and medicine.

"We need to reach the point where there are no civilian casualties," Afghan President Hamid Karzai told lawmakers during the opening session of the parliament following a month-long break.

"Our effort and our criticism will continue until we reach that goal," he said.

London-based think tank, the International Council for Security Development, says the planners of this major operation have little regard for the well-being of civilians.

More than 15,000 troops mainly from the US military have been involved in Operation Moshtarak in the southern province of Helmand.

# **Economical Headlines**

## **Afghanistan calls for investments by Iranian firms**

Press TV / February 21, 2010

Afghanistan invites Iranian firms to help develop economic cooperation between the two countries by investing in different fields in the country.

“Afghanistan imports goods worth \$5 billion per year but the country would be able to produce half of the goods inside the country through a cooperation with Iranian investor companies,” said Noorullah Delawari, Afghan State Minister and President of Afghanistan Investment Support Agency on Saturday, during a visit to Iran Foreign Investment Company.

He mentioned vast mineral resources in Afghanistan as one of the grounds that could attract Iranian companies.

Delawari invited Iranian companies to invest in fields such as power plants, cement factories, metal industries and construction materials such as building stones.

”Afghanistan has been able to attract investments worth \$8bn despite security problems,” he said.

## **Afghanistan interested in Pak tax reforms**

Daily Times (Pakistan)

February 20, 2010

ISLAMABAD: Afghanistan has shown keen interest in the reforms process under way in the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), with a view to using the reforms as a model to revamp its own taxation system. The interest was shown by Dr Ahmad Shah Zamanzai, Director General of Afghanistan Revenue Department, who led a delegation of senior Afghan tax officials during a visit to the Regional Tax Office (RTO) Lahore, according to a press release issued here on Friday.

The visiting delegates said the Pakistani experience of tax reforms could provide them with ample opportunities, which would help Afghanistan revolutionise its own tax reforms.

During the visit, Khawaja Shaukat Ali, Chief Commissioner Inland Revenue Regional Tax Office Lahore, briefed the delegation about the reform process and the milestones achieved in this regard.

# Social Headlines

## **Afghan Govt Pays For Avalanche Victims**

Written by Quqnoos.com

Sunday, 14 February 2010 15:58

The Afghan government pays \$2,000 to the families of each victim of Tuesday's deadly avalanches in the Salang Pass

President Hamid Karzai has called on the Afghan health ministry to send patients with serious injuries abroad for medical treatment, Karzai's Deputy Spokesman, Hamid Elmi, said.

Nearly 170 people were killed and more than 100 others were wounded Tuesday in avalanches in the Salang Pass, north of Kabul.

Avalanches in Salang Pass, the only land-route connecting northern Afghanistan to the capital, Kabul, claim a number of lives each winter.

Survivors of the natural disaster urge President Karzai to mark February 10 a national mourning day as the incident was the worst catastrophe for decades.

Mr Elmi said the Afghan president will make a decision on this once the exact number of deaths is known.

The death toll rose from several avalanches in the Salang Pass and the incident is said to be unprecedented for years.

## **8 renegade Afghan police arrested in S. Afghanistan**

KABUL, Feb. 21 (Xinhua) -- Afghan National Police (ANP) during a search operation in the country's southern Zabul province have arrested eight policemen who joined Taliban militants days ago, Deputy to Provincial police chief said Sunday.

"Eight police constables who joined Taliban in central Wardak province last Wednesday were arrested in Shahri Safa district Saturday evening," Ghulam Jilani Farahi told Xinhua via telephone.

Six militants were also detained during the operation, he further added.

The detention took place while a massive Afghan-NATO operation with involvement of some 15,000 troops is going on against Taliban stronghold in Marja district of Helmand province to consolidate government control and accelerate reconstruction activities in the troubled southern region.

## **Food, medicine lacking in Afghan assault zone**

By Lynne O'Donnell (AFP)

February 21, 2010

KABUL — People living on the front line of a major US-led offensive against Taliban militants in southern Afghanistan are trapped in their homes with little access to food and health care, rights groups say.

Hundreds more who fled the area before fighting began over a week ago are receiving little help in harsh winter conditions, they add.

"We are seriously worried about the safety of civilians, especially in the Marjah area," said Ajmal Samadi, head of the independent group Afghan Rights Monitor (ARM).

"People who are ill cannot get to hospitals, and others cannot bring them medicines. They cannot get food, or even go outside to look after their farms."

He added that food prices were rising due to the assault and people with medical needs -- from war wounds to pregnancy -- were largely unable to get treatment.

The assault on the Marjah and Nad Ali districts of Helmand province launched on February 13 is being held up by snipers and innumerable crude bombs planted by Taliban fighters, commanders say.

The aim of the operation, dubbed Mushtarak (Together), is to drive Taliban from the area in the central Helmand River valley, where they have held sway with drug traffickers for at least two years.

The Afghan government aims firstly to re-establish sovereignty, then provide security, clinics, schools and jobs.

Mushtarak is a test of US President Barack Obama's new counter-insurgency strategy, aimed at winning the trust of the population and neutralising the Taliban. Related article: [Two NATO troops killed in Afghanistan](#)

NATO and Afghan leaders have said they hatched the assault in close cooperation with each other so the military phase can be immediately followed by the establishment of civil administration and services.

But Norine MacDonald, president of London-based think tank the International Council for Security and Development, which has an office in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, said planners had paid little regard to civilian well-being.

"The forward planning we heard so much about did not include ensuring that the local population would be able to leave and live elsewhere in decent conditions, with access to food and medical care," she said.

More than 2,800 families -- averaging about five members each -- had been displaced before and during the fighting, said Abdul Rahman Hutaki, head of the Human Rights and Environment Organisation, an independent Afghan group.

"Conditions for the displaced are deteriorating and sufficient assistance is not getting through," he said.

Provincial authorities say 2,000 displaced families are in Lashkar Gah, receiving help from Afghan and international charities.

But Marjah resident Ahmad Jan, speaking by telephone, said: "Since I came to Lashkar Gah, I haven't received any assistance".

Ghulam Farooq Noorzai, Helmand's director for refugees' affairs, said food and winter clothing had been distributed to 1,400 families.

The 200-square-kilometre (80-square-mile) target zone has been strewn with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) -- on roads, in fields, hanging from trees, even plastered into the walls of homes, commanders say.

Marjah resident Abdul Ghias, 53, told AFP by telephone the IEDs made it impossible to move in or out of the township, adding: "Most people cannot get hold of medicine or food, and people cannot work in their farms."

NATO commanders say it could be another three weeks before the area is under control as fighting between militants and the 15,000-strong force of US Marines, NATO and Afghan troops is proving "difficult". Related article: [A key test of new US policy](#)

In the meantime, people caught in crossfire, shot as Taliban human shields, or injured by bombs face difficulties getting treatment.

The International Committee of the Red Cross says it has the only medical facility in Marjah, a first aid station manned by five people.

Lashkar Gah, where there are two hospitals, is 20 kilometres (12 miles) away by the shortest route, said Bijan Farnoudi, Red Cross spokesman in Kabul.

But the roads are so heavily mined, few are willing to make the journey and alternative routes can take up to seven hours, if anyone dares use them, he said.

Inayatullah Ghafari, Helmand's provincial health director, said: "Since 13 February, 50 people have been brought to different hospitals, injured in different ways, including roadside bombs, mines and in crossfire."

The wounded, including women and children, had mostly been taken to the hospitals in Lashkar Gah, he said.

## **Teacher Shortage Hits Hard in Maidan Wardak**

Institute for War & Peace Reporting

By Fahim Farhad in Maidan Wardak (ARR No. 353, 19-Feb-10)

Students complain lack of decent teachers, textbooks and discipline is damaging their education.

Abdollah, an 18-year-old high school student, sat outside his house in the winter sun, covered with a blanket against the cold, and studied a book about biology he bought in the market.

"There are no textbooks in schools," he complained, adding that they also have no professional teachers, no attendance sheets and no order to their day.

His criticism is shared by many students in Maidan Wardak province, 25 kilometres west of the Kabul, who say that the lack of qualified teachers, proper educational resources and discipline in schools has severely impacted on their education.

"What will the school's achievement be where the teacher is more illiterate than the students?" Abdollah asked.

Maidan Wardak province used to be a stronghold for the Hizb-e-Islami party, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the Taleban, which still has a presence there. Clashes between government and opposition forces and frequent civilian casualties, along with a

lack of resources, have badly affected the education system in the eight districts of the province.

“Most professional teachers have either taken refuge outside the province, been martyred during the wars, or worked for foreign organisations due to economic problems at the moment,” Hafizollah Waziri, Maidan Wardak director of education, said

Waziri told IWPR that there were 331 active schools in the province, employing 4,375 teachers - but accepted that there were problems arising from the lack of trained personnel. Only 510 teachers in the province were qualified, he said.

Ata Mohammad Qaneh, deputy spokesman for the ministry of education, said the shortage of professional teachers was a nationwide problem. Out of 175,000 teachers across Afghanistan, more than 70 per cent have not graduated from training college, while some only made it as far as sixth grade in school.

A 21-year-old student from a teachers' training institute told IWPR that he still knows nothing about teaching, even though he is due to graduate next year.

“There is no education in our teacher training institute,” he said. “Everyone does whatever he wishes. There is no control by the administration. The teachers do not come on time. If an explosion happens somewhere, the teacher training institute and schools are closed for a few days. I wish I had taken some other job from the very beginning.”

Qaneh said that there were plans for more professional teachers to be introduced to Maidan Wardak next year, with a teachers' training centre to be established in each district of the province. Textbooks were also being printed and would be available in schools next year, he added.

Qari Abdolsamad Ahmadi, director of the province's teacher training institute, acknowledged that they lacked proper conditions for training students, although he said the institute had sent their teachers to three seminars last year to learn new education methods.

He said that a building for the local institute was yet to be completed, despite two years of construction work. Classes are held in different rented houses, which he said had caused chaos.

Qaneh told IWPR that the construction work had been delayed due to security problems and the bad winter weather, but that it would be completed next spring.

But students have little faith in these promises.

Mohammad, a twelfth grader, at a local school, said, “The promises about professional teachers, provision of textbooks on time to the schools and construction of school

buildings are given every year by the officials, but nothing has happened in practice yet. Who should we trust, because the officials say one thing but do the other?"

Students' parents are also unhappy with the situation.

The father of a 12-year-old boy at the same school told IWPR, "When my son comes from school, I ask him whether they studied anything. He answers 'father, we studied for one or two hours, but our teachers were absent in other hours'. What do you think the students learn when they study for one or two hours out of six hours? It is not even clear what kind of classes they have taken."