

Afghan effort fruitful but fragile, commander says

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Marine Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills

Camp Pendleton Marines and other U.S. troops are making inroads against insurgents in southern Afghanistan — cutting poppy production, gleaning intelligence, training Afghan soldiers and repopulating former Taliban strongholds — but the next months are critical in the nearly nine-year war, the commander of Marine forces in Afghanistan said Friday.

“We are making progress,” Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills said in a video news conference from Camp Leatherneck in Helmand province. Then he cautioned, “We have some tough fighting ahead of us.”

Mills, who hails from Camp Pendleton’s 1st Marine Division, took command this spring as a surge of 30,000 additional troops authorized by President Barack Obama cycled into Afghanistan, nearly doubling the force in Helmand province to about 20,000 Marines.

More than 17,000 troops from the Camp Pendleton-based 1st Marine Expeditionary Force will deploy there this year.

In the past eight months, the overall military commander in Afghanistan, Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal, has embraced a counterinsurgency plan with tighter rules of engagement to safeguard civilians.

His relatively new military strategy could be undermined by politics, with overtones of that conflict arising during Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai's visit to Washington, D.C., this week. Obama and other White House leaders welcomed Karzai, but the meeting followed a summer re-election campaign marred by allegations of fraud against him and growing tension with the U.S. over rampant corruption in his administration and disagreements about whether to welcome the Taliban into Afghanistan's government.

McChrystal, speaking at a Pentagon news conference Thursday, echoed Obama's message in recent weeks that the fight in Afghanistan will get worse before it gets better. "We should expect increased violence as our combined security forces expand into Taliban-controlled areas," the general said.

Afghanistan had become known as the forgotten war while the previous presidential administration focused on Iraq. The Taliban regrouped, and poppy production soared. Rep. Ike Skelton, a Missouri Democrat and chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, once wrote Obama a letter describing the approach in Afghanistan as "half-ass it and hope."

In Mills' area of operations in Helmand, he has seen nascent signs of success, including significant improvements in security, economic activity and political leadership since his initial battlefield survey in December.

Among those Mills cited:

- Former no-go zones for "the legitimate government of Afghanistan" such as Now Zad and Marjah, both heavily mined scenes of fighting, now have emerging economies and civil services.
- More than 50 percent of authorized government officials in the province have been able to go to work safely.
- About half the poppy production in Helmand has been eliminated. Marines have seized nearly 5 tons of raw opium in recent weeks, and they are promoting a program to encourage farmers to grow wheat instead.

Afghanistan's poppy fields, many of them in the Helmand region, are a major source of funding for the Taliban. They also account for about 90 percent of the worldwide supply of opium.

- Engagement teams of female Marines have been able to connect with Afghan women, often gaining significant intelligence information. A hotline for anonymous tips also is bearing fruit.

Although progress training the Afghan police forces has been slow, Mills conceded, efforts with the Afghan army are proceeding well.

After a lull during the poppy harvest, the frequency of attacks has resumed and all of his battalions are engaged in regular combat against a "ruthless enemy" whose tactics of choice have been roadside bombs and hit-and-run, guerrilla-style ambushes, Mills said.

Nine Marines were killed in the province this month, including two last week from Camp Pendleton

who died in a bomb attack while on foot patrol.

The swelling number of Marines sent to Helmand province has allowed the military to reinforce the main population centers straddling the river valley and push into some new areas such as Musa Qala in the north.

Improvements are steady and noticeable, even if they aren't happening overnight, Mills said. "Things are better here than they were in December," he added.

But the Marines, as well as the Afghans, are aware that the clock is ticking.

"We will be here with them as we develop the Afghan security forces to eventually take over our role, so we can leave," Mills said. The Afghans "have been very, very concerned we may leave them prematurely."

Defense analysts have drawn differing conclusions in recent months from the broader view of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, with some seeing the glass half empty, others half full.

"It is not at all clear that we have made much progress in the long-term goal of creating a stable, peaceful environment in Afghanistan," said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who returned recently from a research trip to Afghanistan.

"This is not a failing of the U.S. military; this is a problem of our Afghan partners. The Afghan government itself is greatly flawed."

Another problem: "We don't have nearly enough troops to control and rule the entire country. It is kind of like a balloon. You squeeze it in one place and the insurgency shows up somewhere else," Bandow said.

The key in this area of the world, Mills said, "is to manage expectations."

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