

---

## Marja offensive small step in larger Afghan strategy

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Feb. 17 (Xinhua) -- If the U.S. and Afghan forces are successful, the fight in the southern town of Marja will mark a step toward tilting the power balance away from the Taliban, experts said.

But before the war-torn country can rid itself of the insurgency that U.S. and Afghan forces have fought for nearly a decade, a number of challenges remain, most of them non-military, experts said.

"I don't think anybody imagines that we will win the war in Marja," said Max Boot, senior fellow for national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, in an interview on the organization's web site.

"It's one step in a long road towards creating the kind of environment where you create security and change the balance of power on the ground. And once you do that, then you don't have to kill or lock up most of the Taliban. A lot of them will just give up or switch sides, and that's the ultimate goal."

Thousands of U.S. Marines, along with Afghan police and soldiers, struck Marja during the weekend in the largest U.S. operation since U.S. forces landed in the embattled nation in October 2001.

The town is located in Afghanistan's Helmand province, which is one of the two critical areas in southern Afghanistan, alongside of Kandahar. The two areas form the core of the Taliban organization, and Helmand, with its opium fields, is especially important, as its crops bring in cash for the insurgency, Boot said.

The offensive was publicized well in advance in a bid to encourage Taliban rank and file, who are more likely driven by regular paychecks than by ideology, some officials said, to leave the Taliban movement and re-enter society.

The U.S. goal is to move away from relying on enemy body count as a metric for success and to begin improving Afghans' quality of life, said Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the CATO Institute, a non-profit public policy research foundation headquartered in Washington, D.C.

But to do that, more than just military force is needed, experts said.

Innocent said while the offensive is being framed as a major operation to win support of local Afghans, the problem will be how the military and the Obama administration translate tactical success into strategic victory.

Indeed, much depends on Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who has been criticized as a corrupt leader and is deeply distrusted by many of the tribal leaders.

Analysts also said much depends on Afghan forces, who are playing a supporting role in the current fight but will gradually ramp up their responsibilities as U.S. forces move closer to the 2011 deadline for the transfer of security duties to Afghan troops.

Afghan forces will be going from door to door in Marja in an effort to become the face of the battle and avoid the perception that U.S. forces are the latest occupier of a string of foreign occupiers, from the Soviets to the British and even Alexander the Great in ancient times.

Perhaps the most important for the Afghan government, experts said, is to make good on its promise to deliver services to a country, which ranks among the world's poorest and least developed countries. It will also have to tackle corruption and win over locals, an endeavor, critics said, has been unsuccessful in the past.

Innocent said it remains unclear whether the offensive will yield the broader goals of a self-sufficient state, decreased corruption, and regional cooperation that the Obama administration hopes to achieve.

And how the operation pans out will also depend on how the American public interprets the conflict, which means the military will try to shape the public's perception of the war as best as it can, she said.

The Pentagon wagers that once Afghans see U.S. and Afghan troops secure Marja, lower level Taliban foot soldiers will begin to lay down their arms and accept Karzai's offer to play a political role in society and earn regular wages for doing so. And that will diminish the Taliban's will to recapture the area, experts said.

That U.S. and Afghan forces have strengthened their relationship bodes well for U.S. objectives, as does the Afghan government's support for the current operation, unlike a number of past missions that did not receive the Karzai administration's blessing.

"It is the first major operation in which we will demonstrate, I think successfully, that the new elements of the strategy -- which combine not only security operations but economic reform and good governance at the local and regional level with a much more visible presence of Afghan forces -- will take place," said Obama's national security advisor James Jones Sunday on Fox News.

And so far, the operation may be showing signs of success, at least tactically, as U.S.-led forces have nearly taken control of an important Taliban stronghold in the south, Afghan government officials reported. But the Associated Press reported Monday that the Taliban has stepped up counter attacks and slowed the U.S. and Afghan advance.

---

