

Afghanistan: What does "ready to withdraw" mean?

By Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Xinhua) -- U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton is expected to visit Afghanistan on Tuesday, and the question on many people's minds is how the security handover from U.S. to Afghan forces is shaping up.

Moreover, while U.S. President Barack Obama's administration said conditions on the ground will dictate the scope and pace of the U.S. withdrawal, critics wonder what that means exactly.

Will U.S. troops stay on after the July, 2011 pullout deadline? Will Washington accept partial Taliban control of the war ravaged country? What factors will determine a full U.S. pullout?

"The president has not been forthcoming about the details of his withdrawal," said Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute. The Obama administration said a scale-down will simply begin on the stated deadline, and officials said that has been misunderstood to mean that all forces will leave the war torn country on that date.

Indeed, some experts said the United States could maintain a large troop presence well beyond the timeline for withdrawal. Obama could be pressured by the military and the development community to leave an unknown number of U.S. forces in the country, Innocent said.

Washington may eventually be forced to allow Taliban factions a degree of control in certain areas of Afghanistan, as long as they are not tied to al-Qaeda or subscribe to radical ideology, she said. The analyst added that the U.S. military may already be leaning in that direction.

Kabul is looking at ways to re-integrate into Afghan society those foot soldiers who joined the Taliban for reasons other than ideology, although critics said similar efforts over the years have made little headway.

The process is expected to begin after Tuesday's international conference in Kabul, where Afghan leaders will seek endorsement for the program, Reuters reported on Monday.

Meanwhile, critics have voiced a slew of additional concerns, among them how Afghan forces can provide security when most cannot so much as read an ID card, as literacy rates are less than 30 percent in Afghanistan. Charges of widespread corruption also plague the administration of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Richard Holbrooke, the Obama administration's special representative for Afghanistan, said training for Afghan police and troops will continue after the deadline, so long as Congress and the U.S. president approve it.

Speaking at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Wednesday, Holbrooke said he is wary of setting a deadline for absolute troop withdrawal, but added that it is important to show Afghans that the United States remains uninterested in an open ended occupation.

Critics blasted Holbrooke for what they viewed as vagueness in describing U.S. goals in Afghanistan.

"I hear a lot of mixed signals," said Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn, at the hearing. "What I feel, because of this lack of clarity, is that we're in Afghanistan because we're in Afghanistan and we don't have the will to be successful and we don't have the will to leave."

According to a recent USA Today/Gallup poll, 58 percent of Americans said they support Obama's withdrawal plan, whereas 38 percent rejected the idea.

At the recent G20 summit in Toronto, Obama said he was more focused on completing the mission in Afghanistan than on the timetable and declined to comment on whether a five-year exit strategy endorsed at the meeting was reasonable.

When questioned on whether the United States is on schedule for the security handover, Holbrooke pointed to a mix of improvements and challenges. The attrition rate for the army and police has dropped, but the Helmand district of Marja lacks local police and judges and is not moving forward as rapidly as expected, for example.

"I do not yet see a definitive turning point in any direction," he said.