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## Will the U.S. send more troops to Afghanistan?

By Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Oct. 21 (Xinhua) -- After recent criticism of U.S. President Barack Obama's perceived dithering on whether to send additional troops to Afghanistan, the White House said Wednesday that a decision may be near.

Many caution against acting before a credible government is established, while others say the president must make a decision immediately.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said Tuesday that the United States must not sit on its hands waiting for the election's outcome. The statement came during the run-up to the Nov. 7 runoff between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his rival Abdullah Abdullah, which was triggered when August's elections were marred by widespread fraud allegations.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said Wednesday that Obama may reach a decision before the runoff, in spite of earlier indications that he would wait until after the elections to determine a course of action.

Senator John Thune (R-SD) on Wednesday told Fox News that the president needed to make a decision soon.

"Our troops, our American people and our allies are all awaiting this decision," Thune said.

But some key Democrats held different views, calling it irresponsible to deploy more forces before it was certain who would rule the embattled country.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.) said he was wary of sending additional forces to the region.

"In Afghanistan itself we have to resolve the question of whether the Taliban are per se a threat to us," the former presidential candidate said last week.

"It would be entirely irresponsible for the President of the United States to commit more troops to this country, when we don't even have an election finished and know who the president is and what kind of government we're working with," Kerry explained.

Thune, however, cautioned against hesitating. "If you wait before there is a new government in Afghanistan, it could be a very long time," he said, adding that the process of electing and setting up a government, especially in Afghanistan, was time-consuming.

"We need to make our decisions based on security," he said.

Gen. Stanley McCrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, said time was running out for the United States, as the security situation in the war-torn country was rapidly deteriorating. He recommended the deployment of an additional 40,000 troops.

While the number of troops to be deployed -- if any -- remains unknown, many Congressional Republicans said they would not vote for a surge unless additional forces number at least 40,000.

Thune echoed such sentiments, saying the United States could not "do it halfway."

Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst at the Washington, D.C.-based CATO institute, said: "You don't want to deploy more troops until you know the outcome of the elections."

Until it is known who will be in power, inaction was the proper course, she said.

Aside from rifts among politicians, Americans are also split on whether to send more troops, with 47 percent of those polled in favor of the buildup and 49 percent against it, according to a new Washington Post-ABC News poll.

No matter who wins the upcoming elections, complications could arise. If Karzai loses, it could alienate the Pashtuns -- the country's largest ethnic group, to which the Afghan president belongs. And if he wins, the United States would appear to be propping up an illegitimate government, Innocent said.

"The government is seen (by Afghans) as very corrupt and that's a stumbling block for the mission," she asserted.

In this regard, Afghanistan could mirror the U.S. conflict in Vietnam. The United States was viewed both inside and outside of Vietnam as keeping afloat the corruption-ridden and incompetent government of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem.

Other experts, however, dismissed such a comparison, saying that Karzai's government had in the past publicly lashed out at the Obama administration -- hardly the actions of a puppet president.

Andy Johnson, director of the National Security Program at the Washington, D.C.-based Third Way and former staff director of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said military victory in Afghanistan was intertwined with the country's political situation.

"There needs to be a demonstration that the government is credible, not only to the international community, but also to the Afghan people," he said. That would shore up Afghans' support for the government in its fight against the Taliban.

Michael Kugelman, Asia program associate at the Washington, D.C.-based Woodrow Wilson Center, said: "One big issue will be logistical: the months of advance planning that went into the first round of elections will need to be repeated over just a few weeks.

"With less time to put security measures in place, more people may stay away," Kugelman cautioned.

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