

## US Forces In Afghanistan To Deploy New Strategy Over Christmas

The Nation - 13/06/2003

AHMED RASHID IN BAGRAM AND KABUL.

The US has made a crucial change of strategy in Afghanistan lately, taking on reconstruction and security responsibilities outside the capital, where it was previously reluctant to send troops. Although the new US approach is flexible and sensitive to suggestions by other stakeholders such as President Hamid Karzai, the United Nations and aid agencies, many are critical saying that, while better than nothing, the new US approach avoids what's really needed -- US backing for a full-fledged expansion of international peacekeeping troops throughout the country -- and that it puts at risk aid workers under US protection.

Drive along Disney Drive through Viper City, passing Cajun Country on your left. As you enter Dragon City be careful of the speed bumps, the speed limit and the heavily armed military police who watch the road from wooden stockades. On your left is the shopping precinct. Inside the supermarket dozens of young American men and women are milling around a giant lit up Christmas tree, buying everything from Pringles potato chips to the top ten music CDs and movie DVDs. On your right tents stretch as far as the eye can see and amongst them is a giant tent holding the office of General Dan MacNeill, commander of US forces in Afghanistan.

The street names may sound like California, but this is Bagram airbase north of Kabul where 8000 American troops and their Western coalition allies will be spending Christmas, entertained by the likes of comedian Drew Carey, while having special pre-cooked Christmas lunches flown in from US bases in Germany.

Outside the past summer's heat and dust that once clogged every soldier's lungs and weapon has now turned to below freezing cold, rain and slush. Inside, the giant tent holds the operations command center where dozens of US officers sitting at trestle wooden tables stare at computer screens with which they keep in touch with every US army base, foot patrol, plane in the sky and bullet that is fired in Afghanistan and even neighboring countries. General MacNeill sits so unobtrusively amidst his officers that a journalist stumbles onto him before realizing who he is. The only distinguishing mark is his name tag and a bank of satellite telephones on his desk.

In fact Christmas for many soldiers at Bagram is not going to be a party. Some 70 soldiers, civil affairs officers, engineers, medics and State Department officials assembled into a Joint Regional Team (JRT) will be deploying to Gardez - one of the hottest Al-Qaeda regions in eastern Afghanistan - to set up a base which will help the government of President Hamid Karzai expand the still dormant authority of his government and begin reconstruction projects outside Kabul. Another JRT is being put together for quick deployment to Kunduz in the north.

"We saw some months ago that operations here were likely to change by the year end so we proposed changes (to the Defense Department)," says General MacNeill in an interview. "Our prediction was that most parts of the country will soon begin to realize some reasonable degree of security and stability," he adds.

Facing a blaze of criticism from Afghans and Western aid agencies over the past few months that the US government was not doing enough to help the Karzai government begin reconstruction of the country and deal with the powerful warlords in the regions, in November General McNeill began holding talks with all concerned parties - the US and Afghan government and military, the United Nations, non-governmental agencies (NGOs), Western allies particularly Britain, Germany and France and officers of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) - the peacekeepers in Kabul.

MacNeill said the US faced "a chicken and egg situation" on whether it should concentrate on ensuring security first or start reconstruction first. He now believes that reconstruction "could lead the process because it would pull an improvement of security along." He said the idea was to pursue "the residue of Al'Qaeda and those who support it" while at the same time "pursue support for the central government if we built teams and dispersed them at 7-8 locations coinciding with the international coalition and the United Nations, which could speed up the process of reconstruction. "

He admits there will be a process of trial and error and every location will require a separate strategy. "We had nothing in any book that this is the way to do it - it's all new for us," he says. In fact, say UN officials who have negotiated with General McNeill, the strength of the plan lies in its apparent flexibility. "The US military has no "(Secretary of State) Rumsfeld designated template or model and instead McNeill is modifying the plan along the way as stake holders like the UN or Karzai have questioned some parts of it," says a UN official.

After some reservations President Karzai came on board. "My thinking is that JRTs are a good step because I see them as being part of the reconstruction process and to speed up economic activity around the country," says President Karzai in an interview in his office in Kabul. "The local administration has to be put in place so that the central government authority is everywhere and the struggles of local commanders and warlords is diminished," he adds. Karzai has promised that he will send out good and honest local officials to work alongside the JRTs.

The idea is also supported by General Mohammed Fahim, the Defense Minister who leads the Tajik faction of the government and until recently had been resisting US and UN ideas for rebuilding the army on smaller and more modern lines. "The need of today is for a central authority and the rule of law and so these (US) new efforts will help concentrate a strong central authority," says Fahim.

But there are continuing strong criticisms from Western and Afghan NGOs, human rights groups and some European diplomats who feel that US support for expanding ISAF outside Kabul would be more productive. For aid workers the JRTs will blur the distinction for Afghan civilians between soldiers and aid workers making aid workers lives more difficult and at risk.

"This change in strategy is both risky and premature. It seems driven more by developing events in Iraq or Washington than the reality on the ground in Afghanistan," says Rafael Robillard, head of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief which comprises of 73 NGOs. Adds Paul Barker of CARE International - a largely US funded NGO, "If we work alongside armed military personnel, or help one community more than another because they are pro-US...we will

jeopardize the safety of our staff.”

European diplomats say it is not an alternative to the expansion of ISAF and they criticize the US for not offering to provide air cover, logistics and other support which would encourage even force their government to commit more European troops for an expansion of ISAF outside Kabul.

Deploying JRTs on the eve of what could be a US attack on Iraq will demonstrate to the Afghan government that the US has no intentions of abandoning the country, even though it will involve considerable military backup from existing US forces. “The teams will be backed up .....which will mean rapid deployment of troops if the teams are threatened,” says McNeill.

Also involved will be US air cover, air extraction of the teams if necessary and supplies and logistics - an expanded deployment for existing US forces in Afghanistan when the Pentagon’s entire focus is on Iraq right now. McNeill said he did not expect “any change in the resources we need if other events may happen” such as a US invasion of Iraq. Other Western officers say the JRT experience is likely to become hugely important in developing similar teams for Iraq in the post-Saddam era.

By next spring JRTs will be deployed in 7 major regional centers, Bamiyan in central Afghanistan, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz in the north, Herat in the west and Gardez, Jalalabad and Kandahar in the sensitive Pashtun belt in the south and east. If the idea is successful JRTs could expand to 13 and many more could follow. (PUT ON MAP)

UN and US officials say the aims of the JRTs will be to help local authorities determine the priorities for reconstruction and allow UN agencies and NGOs to work freely, provide links with the central government for local Afghan administrators, help develop customs and tax collection infrastructure, help the government begin demobilizing warlord armies and creating the atmospherics to allow the government to spend some US 300 million dollars allocated for reconstruction of rural areas next spring. However US officers admit, the JRTs cannot provide all round security for the Afghan people and would not be a replacement for the expansion of ISAF outside Kabul.

Nor will the JRTs get involved “in green on green,” says McNeill, which initially meant no US mediation of local disputes between Afghan commanders and warlords. Senior aides to President Karzai said they had bluntly told McNeil that many of the warlords now creating major problems for the government were “created by you the Americans during the war against the Taliban, you brought them to power and now you have to deal with them.”

That has prompted another modification - the JRT commander will have greater flexibility on how to deal with local warlords in cooperation with central government officials. “We will do our best to dissuade people from aggression and have a reach back facility so that the central government can take the dominating role in resolving local friction,” says McNeill.

For the past week some 200 Afghan soldiers newly trained by the US to become part of the new Afghan National Army have been deployed in eastern Afghanistan. "They are responsible for explaining the JRT concept to the people, who are seeing their new army for the first time," says McNeill. The US has so far trained some 2000 men of a planned 70,000 new Afghan army and once more men are trained Afghan battalions may accompany the JRTs.

US officers have no illusions that the JRTs may well provoke stepped up attacks by remnants of Al'Qaeda, the Taliban and forces loyal to the radical commander Gulbuddin Hikmetyar hiding out along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. "There is some likelihood of people coming across the border but we have asked the Pakistan army not to let anyone through. Hikmetyar poses a significant danger and long term threat to Afghanistan - he is a very dangerous character," says McNeill.

McNeill says he has no compelling evidence that Osama bin Laden is either dead or alive, but it is likely that the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar is now hiding out in Pakistan. "We get so many reports about Omar .... but he may be in a neighboring country."