

Afghanistan

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Ahmed Rashid/ Washington and Islamabad

The Pentagon will create security enclaves in a dozen or so Afghan cities to let American military and aid officials operate safely, part of a subtle but important shift in U.S. policy that puts more emphasis on reconstruction and internal security than the administration was willing to countenance just a few months ago.

The new U.S. strategy, described by State Department officials, is already under criticism as a halfway measure that neglects security for Afghans and non-American aid workers. But others quietly suggest that, if successful in Afghanistan, the approach could be used in Iraq after an ouster of President Saddam Hussein.

Since U.S. troops arrived in Afghanistan late last year, Washington has focused on catching remnants of the ousted Taliban regime and its al Qaeda allies, and has shunned Afghan calls to help provide security in warlord-controlled regions outside the capital, itself patrolled by an International Security Assistance Force comprising about 4,800 from two dozen nations. Kabul has also called on the U.S. to take a bigger role in reconstructing the country.

The U.S. policy shift that has emerged in recent weeks is a step toward both. People familiar with the administration's thinking say U.S. engineers, diplomats and aid workers protected by American and British troops will deploy this month to Gardez, in eastern Afghanistan, to set up the first of several enclaves intended as hubs for reconstruction efforts. The plan awaits final approval by President Bush, who is expected to sign off on it.

"It would produce what I call the ISAF effect, it would facilitate reconstruction that would give people a sense of confidence," says Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan, speaking in Washington recently.

For the past nine months, the United Nations, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and various aid agencies have called for ISAF's expansion to major cities outside Kabul, an idea the U.S. had blocked, fearing the diversion of military resources would hinder the hunt for Islamic terrorists in the country's east. When the Bush administration slowly began to show support for the idea this summer, the governments of ISAF's European contingents balked, reluctant to provide the additional troops expansion would require.

But Afghanistan's steadily deteriorating security situation appears to have changed administration thinking. In the north, there has been sporadic conflict among warlords that has forced aid agencies to stop working. U.S. bases around the country receive rocket barrages almost daily, and last week six rockets were fired at government buildings in Kabul. Beginning Sunday, two western warlords engaged in clashes that prompted the U.S. to intervene with B-52 airstrikes for the first time since July. A government-brokered truce reached yesterday ended the fighting, which killed at least 60 people. Clashes among rival warlords killed at least 60 people and were temporarily halted when a U.S. B-52 bombed the position of one faction, the first such American action in many months.

"The most serious challenge facing Afghanistan and Afghans today remains the lack of security," says Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N. special envoy to Afghanistan. Visiting Afghanistan over the Thanksgiving weekend, Gen. Tommy Franks, head of U.S. Central Command, said terrorist elements remain active in as much as one-third of the country.

The first indication of a shift in U.S. emphasis appeared this summer in a Central Intelligence Agency assessment, part of which was disclosed to Congress, which argued that reconstruction "may be the single most important factor in increased security throughout Afghanistan."

The Afghan government and the U.N. have partially welcomed the U.S. move. "It's better than nothing," says a

U.N. official in Kabul. Zalmay Rassoul, national security adviser for President Karzai, called the shift "a positive step in the right direction."

"Others aren't so sure. "It isn't yet clear what will be the position of European aid agencies, the central government and other nongovernmental organizations in these American enclaves outside Kabul," says Francesc Vendrell, the European Union's representative in Afghanistan.

"Reconstruction has to be a multinational effort, which is why you need an ISAF force."

The Pentagon already has about 60 civil-affairs officers in Afghanistan who have overseen 225 small projects this year, among them rebuilding schools and bridges. The new plan would induct an additional 200 to 300 such officers.

That worries aid agencies, who say the presence of the armed, uniformed officers blurs the distinction between soldiers and aid workers, making aid workers vulnerable to attack. Aid officials say the fact that U.S. officers work closely with regional warlords actually strengthens them and undermines efforts to broaden Kabul's writ beyond Kabul. Because the U.S. enclaves would rely on the goodwill of pro-U.S., anti-Kabul warlords, some fear, there would be little role for representatives of the central government.

It is also unclear how the enclaves will provide security for the Afghan population, which is critically important if al Qaeda is to be thwarted from winning support.

Many Afghans and Western experts still want an expansion of ISAF beyond Kabul. So does Congress, both houses of which passed a \$3.3 billion, four-year aid bill for Afghanistan last month that allocates \$1 billion for expansion of ISAF. The bill urges President Bush to "to use the full diplomatic influence" of the U.S. to persuade the U.N. Security Council to authorize an expansion. The bill now has to go through several appropriations committees, but Hill staffers familiar with the legislation say it has President Bush's support.

U.S. officials say the shift of tack in Afghanistan is partially motivated by the impending war with Iraq and by concern over Muslim perceptions that the U.S. is interested more in bombing Islamic nations than it is in reconstructing them.

At the same time, the new plan is also has the Pentagon expanding its reach into the aid and reconstruction business, once the purview of the U.S. Agency for International Development, which U.S. officials familiar with the situation say the Defense Department has steadily sidelined in Afghanistan.

They say USAID was not even consulted about the new plan, but presented with the decision by the Pentagon. That has given rise to talk in Washington about a similar situation in a post-Hussein Iraq: a U.S. general serving as a short-term ruler and controlling the country's reconstruction.

Meanwhile, there has been progress on another key security issue: establishment of a national Afghan army that would replace the warlord forces now ruling various regions. Speaking at a conference near Bonn marking the first anniversary of the accord that led to creation of his government, President Karzai formally presented a plan to establish a civilian-controlled military force of as many as 70,000 troops. The plan emerged from an early-November conference of Karzai officials and major warlords-observed by U.S. officials-and has won the crucial acquiescence of Defense Minister and former warlord Muhammad Fahim.

The warlords have also agreed to demobilize 150,000 excess soldiers and divide the country into four army commands under the Defense Ministry. The U.S., which is leading the training of Afghan soldiers, says it is ultimately the task of the new Afghan army to create a secure environment for development and democracy. However the new army is still several years from completion.