

US Embarks On New Afghan Strategy

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Bagram

In the supermarket at the US military base at Bagram, north of Kabul, dozens of young American soldiers are milling around a large Christmas tree lit up by fairy lights, buying everything from CDs to PlayStations.

Outside in the freezing cold, rain and slush of a typical Afghan winter, tents stretch as far as the eye can see. The soldiers of the 8,000-strong US and coalition force will have a Christmas lunch pre-cooked and flown in from Hollywood. But Christmas is not going to be a party.

Over the holiday season, US forces in Afghanistan will undertake their most significant redeployment and strategic shift since the war against the Taliban and al-Qa'eda ended a year ago.

About 70 soldiers, civil affairs officers, engineers, medics and State Department officials assembled into a joint regional team will be moving to Gardez - one of the hottest al-Qa'eda regions in eastern Afghanistan - to set up a base that will help President Hamid Karzai expand the authority of his government and begin reconstruction projects outside the capital.

"We saw some months ago that operations here were likely to change by the year-end so we proposed changes," said Gen Dan McNeill, the force commander.

Washington has faced enormous criticism from Afghans and western aid agencies over the past few months. They claim that the US military is not doing enough to help the Karzai government begin reconstruction and deal with the powerful regional warlords.

So last month Gen McNeill began talks with all concerned parties - the US and Afghan government and military, the United Nations, western allies, and officers of the International Security Assistance Force, the peacekeepers in Kabul.

He said America faced "a chicken and egg situation" on whether it should concentrate on ensuring security first or start reconstruction first. He believes that reconstruction "could lead the process because it would pull an improvement of security along". "We had nothing in any book that this is the way to do it," he said. "It's all new for us."

UN officials who have negotiated with Gen McNeill say the strength of the plan lies in its apparent flexibility and his open approach.

Mr Karzai has approved the plan but there are strong criticisms from western and Afghan non-governmental organisations, human rights groups and some European diplomats who feel that US support for expanding ISAF outside Kabul would be more productive.

"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," said Rafael Robillard, head of the Agency Co-ordinating Body for Afghan Relief, which represents 73 NGOs.

"Working on aid projects with US soldiers will make us all a target for al-Qa'eda and confuse the population as to who is supposed to defend them and who is supposed to rebuild their villages," said the head of a European

NGO.

Deploying joint regional teams will demonstrate to the Afghan government that America has no intentions of abandoning the country, even though it will involve considerable military back-up from US forces.

Gen McNeill will have to provide air cover and the means to evacuate the teams, if necessary, and logistics - an expanded deployment for existing US forces in Afghanistan when the Pentagon's entire focus is on Iraq. The experience is likely to become important in developing similar teams for Iraq in the post-Saddam era.

The teams will 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 and start the demobilisation of warlord armies.

US officers have no illusions that the teams may provoke increased attacks by remnants of al-Qa'eda, the Taliban and forces loyal to the radical commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

But European diplomats say America took enormous risks in taking on al-Qa'eda and the Taliban last year, and now have to take similar risks in helping to rebuild Afghanistan.