US commander seeks 10,000 more troops for Afghanistan

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The top US military commander in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. David McKiernan, has formally requested the deployment of an additional 10,000 US combat troops for the increasingly bloody war in the Central Asian country.

The request is moving up the Pentagon chain of command, but no decision is expected from President Obama until the fall, Pentagon officials told a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee Wednesday.

General David Petraeus, head of US Central Command, who is in overall charge of the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy testified before the Senate panel and gave further details of the strategy proposed by the Obama administration on March 27.

The additional 10,000 troops would not be expected in Afghanistan until early in 2010, Petraeus said, when they would join the 37,000 troops deployed by the Bush administration and another 21,000 dispatched by Obama since he took office January 20.

Flournoy said, "What the President was told is that that request is out there but he doesn't have to make the decision until the fall, so that the troops would arrive, as planned, in 2010." This is the first official confirmation from the Pentagon of the upcoming deployment decision.

The total US contingent of 68,000 troops in 2010, backed by another 32,000 troops from various NATO countries, would bring the size of the foreign occupation force deployed in Afghanistan to roughly the 100,000 mobilized when the Soviet Union invaded the country in 1979.

Interviewed on a news program last Sunday, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates indicated that he had no doubt Obama would approve the additional 10,000 troops, speaking of an American deployment of 68,000 by next year.

The Obama policy significantly expands the scale of operations by treating Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single battle zone, dubbed Af-Pak in Pentagon jargon. Afghanistan and Pakistan "are two countries that comprise a single theater for our diplomacy," Flournoy said. "The futures of the two countries are inextricably linked."

Flournoy will join Obama for the April 3-4 NATO summit in Strasbourg, France and Kehl, Germany, where the US government will appeal for greater NATO contributions to the war. Given the overwhelming domestic opposition to increased military involvement in Central Asia, nearly every European member of NATO has declined to send more troops, opting to offer only minor increases in materiel and financial aid, if anything.

Petraeus, Flournoy and other Pentagon witnesses painted a grim picture of the progress of combat operations against Taliban and other Afghan insurgents and predicted increased US casualties. Admiral Eric Olson, head of the US Special Operations Command, declared, "The situation in this region is increasingly dire."

"Indeed, insurgent successes correlate directly to the Afghan people's growing disenchantment with their government due to its incapacity to serve the population," Petraeus said in a prepared statement for the Senate committee.

Petraeus told the panel, "The extremists that have established sanctuaries in the rugged border areas not only contribute to the deteriorating security in eastern and southern Afghanistan, they also pose an ever more serious threat to Pakistan's very existence."

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He did not explain how a few thousand insurgents could threaten the existence of a country of 173 million people, with an army larger than that of the United States. The hyperbole is intended to provide a political rationale for greatly expanded US military operations inside Pakistan, to be justified by the need to "save" Pakistan—and its nuclear weapons arsenal—from takeover by the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The Senate hearing came only hours after the latest US missile strike in Pakistan, which killed at least a dozen people, all predictably described by the Pentagon as "terrorists" or "militants," although at least some are undoubtedly ordinary villagers. The attack was the first in the Orakzai district of Pakistan's border zone with Afghanistan, where the population on both sides of the border is Pashtun-speaking and has close tribal ties.

Both Democratic and Republican senators pressed the Pentagon delegation for signs of progress in the war, with particular criticism from both parties directed at the Pakistani military. Several senators cited press accounts of the close ties between the Pakistani military intelligence service, ISI, and both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.

Committee Chairman Carl Levin, a Democrat from Michigan, said, "I remain skeptical that Pakistan has either the will or the capability to secure their border, particularly between Baluchistan and southern Afghanistan." But he reiterated his full support for the overall US government policy, saying, "The Obama administration's plan for Afghanistan is on the right track."

Levin disputed claims by Obama administration officials that assistance from Pakistan was vital to success for the US military operation in Afghanistan, suggesting that there should be a more concerted effort to build up the Afghan army and police. The figure projected by the White House of 134,000 Afghan troops was too low, he said. Flournoy assured him, in response, that "the door is definitely open to a larger force."

Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a leading Republican on the panel, asked Petraeus directly whether the "central front of the war on terror" had shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan. Petraeus said that it had, but added that the new central front included both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the latest bloody incident in Afghanistan itself, four Taliban suicide bombers dressed in Afghan army uniforms attacked a government office in Kandahar Wednesday, killing 13 people. The raid was a complex operation that involved both a car bomb and an assault by insurgents wearing suicide vests and armed with assault rifles. It was timed for a meeting of tribal leaders at the provincial council offices in Afghanistan's second-largest city. The head of the provincial council, Ahmad Wali Karzai, the brother of President Hamid Karzai, narrowly escaped the attack, telling reporters he had left the office about five minutes before it took place.

The intensifying US military intervention in Afghanistan overshadowed the international conference on economic aid to the impoverished country held Tuesday in The Hague. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pushed to hold the conference to drum up financial contributions to offset the impact of the deteriorating security situation.

The Obama administration committed another $40 million to underwrite the cost of the presidential election set for August 20 in Afghanistan, but a $60 million shortfall remains. Clinton admitted that most European and Asian countries were reluctant to make further donations, not only because of their own economic problems, but because so much of the aid delivered already to Afghanistan has vanished into the pockets of the country's notoriously corrupt and warlord-ridden ruling elite. "There is very little credibility for what was invested," she admitted.

Clinton endorsed plans by the Karzai government to hold talks with "moderate" members of the Taliban. This is in line with the Obama administration's aim of emulating in Afghanistan the military "surge" strategy employed by Petraeus in Iraq, which involved bribing a section of Sunni tribal leaders while intensifying the murderous assault on insurgent elements that refused to work with US occupation forces.

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