

NATO Commander Details Afghanistan Security, Reconstruction

This year has been the most violent in Afghanistan since the Taliban fell, with more than 130 suicide bombings and more than 2,600 dead. U.S. Gen. Dan McNeill, the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, discusses efforts to combat Taliban fighters.



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JIM LEHRER: And finally tonight, an update on the war in Afghanistan. Gwen Ifill begins our coverage.

GWEN IFILL: Afghanistan, once an American success story, is anything but that for now.

Just this year's statistics tell the story: more than 130 suicide bombings, a tactic unheard of just a few years ago; more than 2,600 dead, the most violent year since the Taliban fell and more than 50 percent higher than the same time last year; and the Taliban itself resurgent and, in some sections of the country, in control.

iCasualties.org, which tracks military deaths, reported 111 U.S. and 115 coalition soldiers have been killed this year.

Six years ago, it was a different story. A U.S.-led coalition drove the Taliban from power and helped install pro-Western President Hamid Karzai. But Karzai's government, supported by 41,000 NATO troops, is struggling to maintain control of the countryside.

One recent suicide bomb attack killed 13 people by ramming a minibus last week. It happened on the last day of Defense Secretary Robert Gates's two-day visit to Afghanistan, where he met with Karzai, who asked for additional help.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's production of poppies, the main ingredient for opium, is at an all-time high. According to the United Nations, 93 percent of the world's opium is produced in Afghanistan.

U.S. General Dan McNeill, the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, sat down to talk with us about the challenges on the ground when he visited Washington last week.

General McNeill, welcome.

Fighting an asymmetric war

GEN. DAN MCNEILL, Commander, International Security Assistance Force: Gwen, thank you. It's kind of you to have me here today.

GWEN IFILL: You took over command of NATO forces in Afghanistan last February?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: Roughly 10 months ago.

GWEN IFILL: This year has been the bloodiest year since the fall of the Taliban, 6,200 lives so far. What's happening?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: Well, we have not held back with the force that we have in NATO. It's bigger than it was last year, far more capable.

And the Taliban, if you'll recall the news reports of last fall, claimed they were coming spring, summer offensive. We just felt we wouldn't wait on them and we'd go out after them. We find ourselves operating in some places in which NATO forces, ISAF forces, had not previously operated.

And you could probably make the argument that some of the coalition forces before the advent of NATO weren't operating there and there wasn't sufficient Afghan security forces to operate.

So we were pushing into places that may be a little more difficult to get to, may find a whole lot more opportunity for contacts. And I think that explains why the increased amount of violence has occurred, that plus the insurgent, who has not had any success on the battlefield this year, as we predicted earlier in the year, would turn to what is known in the lexicon as asymmetric type of warfare, more suicide bombers, more IEDs, and, indeed, that has



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come to pass.

GWEN IFILL: Can I ask you about those suicide bombers, 130-plus so far? Do we think that they represent a return or rise in al-Qaida?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: I don't think it represents a return of al-Qaida. I think they're mostly Taliban operatives. But I am certain that it indicates a change in tactics, which we predicted would occur.

The good news is that portion which doesn't make the news or those that are intercepted and those that are stopped left of the blast.

Taliban found 'sanctuaries'



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International Security
Assistance Force

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GWEN IFILL: But the Taliban, we thought at one point, we were told at one point, was vanquished, had been wiped out. Is it alive and well now?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: Well, that statement didn't come from me, and I had a previous tour over there, and it was never my view. I thought they had scattered to some areas where we could not get to them. And now we are getting into those areas.

That's not to say that they don't continue to grow. When you have sanctuaries that can breed them just out of the reach of the security forces that are prosecuting this counterinsurgency, it becomes difficult and, indeed, they can grow in those sanctuaries.

GWEN IFILL: Sanctuaries, as in Pakistan?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: Sanctuaries that are just out of the reach of security forces.

GWEN IFILL: What do you do about that? How do you get into those border areas, which are just out of the reach of security forces?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: I think it's important that everybody acknowledge and understand that Afghanistan is a regional issue. They have neighbors. And the neighbors have to want security and stability as bad as the Afghans want it. And the neighbors have to take on problems that may be outside of the Afghan borders that have an effect on the Afghans. Some neighbors seem to be doing that now.

GWEN IFILL: Which neighbors?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: Well, Pakistan certainly seems to be going after extremists and insurgents in the FATA and areas around the FATA, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

An "under-resourced" force

GWEN IFILL: When you think about what you need to do your job on the ground militarily, does that mean more NATO forces? Does that mean a beefed-up Afghan security presence?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: I think it means both. By U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine, we should have security forces that total well over 400,000. That's not going to happen. The present plan in the international community is to build the Afghan army to a force between 70,000 and 80,000. The police, I believe, the figure is 82,000. NATO right now is running about 41,000.

I don't foresee, by the statements that the secretary-general and supreme allied commander in Europe, that it's going to get a lot bigger, because they've been working hard on the allies to contribute more, and those things don't seem to be forthcoming.

So we're going to have to do what we have to do with what we have. And it's an under-resourced force. The secretary-general has been clear about that. SAC here has been clear about that. Ray Henault, the head of the military committee, has been very clear about that.

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: So what can we do? Well, we have to work a little faster, a little harder, and a little more efficiently on growing the Afghan national security forces. We're doing quite well with the army. That has taken their position on the battlefield this year, not in fully independent operations, but nevertheless very well-prosecuted military operations with their NATO allies.

And I think the gap between what we should have and what we have today is going to have to be filled by the development of Afghan national security forces.



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between what we should have and what we have today is going to have to be filled by the development of Afghan national security forces. ”

The police, probably the most missing key ingredient right now, and it's my view the international community has observed that, since the spring and now are galvanized behind it, and I expect to see much, much faster progress in developing the police. But in truth, the police are probably a year-and-a-half to two years behind the army.

GWEN IFILL: OK, so there's your timeframe. If you plot the rise of the Taliban on one graph line and you plot the growth in needed security forces on the other, can they meet in time?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: There is, indeed, a period of risk. What do you do to mitigate that? Well, you do exactly what we're doing. We're not sitting inside of our foreign operating bases. We're outside; we're advancing against the enemy.

We are attacking him, not only his formations, but we're attacking his command and control. We're not only seeking to defeat him, but to defeat his strategy, which is to separate him from the people. We're doing that through what are called non-cosmetic means.

There's about a half billion dollars worth of reconstruction projects that the 25 Provincial Reconstruction Teams under the NATO aegis currently have their fingers on and help coming around. Those things will separate the insurgent from the people, and it will help defeat his strategy.

The view of the Afghan people

GWEN IFILL: But some Europeans, who are your allies in this, have said that the air strikes, for instance, are turning Afghans against the NATO forces and causing collateral damage, and that that's not the best strategy.

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: Well, and, indeed, there is some truth to that. There have been noncombatant deaths, but I would want to point out to all of our listeners the stringent methods that we take to make sure we minimize risk to the Afghan people, as well as their property.

And often the insurgent puts out statements about what has occurred that simply is not true. We've been able to refute a number of those. He's a little better at information operations, so to speak, than we are, one, because he feels no compelling need to be accurate. That's not my view. We have to be very accurate with what we say.

And there's a lot of comments about the will of the Afghan people. I heard on my first tour there that the will of the Afghan people was eroding. When I left in 2003, I heard, you know, we've got only a few months to go because of the will of the Afghan people.

My view is that we don't have the erosion of support of the Afghan people that have been reported in some polls and by statements of others.

GWEN IFILL: If you had to revisit one part of the policy, say, poppy eradication, which has also made some people unhappy on the ground, or the approach that you use to wipe out the Taliban or to get to them, what would you think about revisiting at this stage?

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: Well, I certainly would continue to say the things that I have said about the force and the fact that it's under-resourced. And I can't say it quite as eloquently as the secretary-general of NATO has said it or the supreme allied command in Europe or, for that matter, the head of the NATO military committee. That's one of the things.

The other thing is I would work harder with the international community to galvanize their view about the poppy growth. It is an undermining factor of everything we're trying to accomplish.

NATO has its military force, ISAF, operating in three lines of operation or three lines of effort: security, reconstruction and governance, or enabling governance. Poppy growth corrupts governance. It causes the people to turn away from these fine reconstruction projects the international community are doing with them. And it certainly makes the security situation harder. Those are the things I'd focus on.

GWEN IFILL: OK, General Dan McNeill, thank you very much for joining us.

GEN. DAN MCNEILL: Thank you.

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