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4,000 more troops heading to Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama is committing an additional 4,000 American service members this fall “to train Afghan security forces. For the first time, this will truly resource our effort to train and support the Afghan army and police.

“Every American unit in Afghanistan will be partnered with an Afghan unit, and we will seek additional trainers from our NATO allies to ensure that every Afghan unit has a coalition partner.”

Adding, “We will accelerate our efforts to build an Afghan army of 134,000 and a police force of 82,000 so that we can meet these goals by 2011—and increases in Afghan forces may very well be needed as our plans to turn over security responsibility to the Afghans go forward.”

In making the announcement March 27, the president acknowledged his earlier pledge to send 17,000 more American service members to “take the fight to the Taliban in the south and the east, and give us a greater capacity to partner with Afghan security forces and to go after insurgents along the border.

“This push will also help provide security in advance of the important presidential elections in Afghanistan in August.”

He said the strategy for the region is to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda.”

Putting the new American forces in the southern part of the country would also allow greater counter-narcotics efforts in that region. The Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan use drug profits to finance their military operations, U.S. defense officials have testified.

“It is important for the American people to understand that Pakistan needs our help in going after al Qaeda,” Obama said. “[Pakistan’s] ability to destroy these safe havens is tied to its own strength and security.”

The weakness of Pakistan’s central government and waning economy is indirectly responsible for al Qaeda’s ability to harbor and operate safe havens along the border region. The review calls for Congress to authorize \$1.5 billion in support for the Pakistani people annually over a five-year course to build schools, roads and hospitals to strengthen the country’s democracy, Obama said.

Guard restructures bonus program. Since 2005, the number of Army National Guard enlistees has grown due in large part to enlistment bonuses ranging from \$2,000 to \$15,000. But that changed March 1 as the Army National Guard restructures the way it pays out those bonuses.

“About 78 percent of people that joined the Army National Guard over the last three years received a bonus of some kind,” Army Col. Michael Jones, commander of the Army Guard’s Strength Command, said, which oversees recruiting and retention issues. “That will be reduced to about 5 percent going forward.”

A drop in the number of bonuses being paid is a result of several factors.

“We had to scale back on some of the bonuses we were offering due to some funding challenges and trying to live within the appropriations we’ve been given,” Jones said, who added that the funding for those bonuses has been affected by the country’s current economic environment.

Because of that, rather than providing enlistment bonuses across the board, bonuses will be linked to specific career fields or units within the Army Guard.

“Going forward, the 5 percent of soldiers that will receive a bonus will be targeted toward very critical skills (military occupational specialties) or units that are sourced [meaning] they’ve gotten their alert that they are going to be deployed,” Jones said. Critical MOSs include medical, military intelligence and transportation, among others.

The change in the bonus structure will also affect those who are considering re-enlistment in the Army Guard.

“Our retention bonuses will vary as well,” Jones said. The standard re-enlistment bonus has been \$15,000 for an additional six-year commitment, but “that will be paired back to \$5,000 for units not deploying and if you are deploying, that will be paired down to \$10,000.”

But while these financial bonuses are scaled back, other opportunities may be available for soldiers. “We’re looking at things that are non-monetary,” Jones said. “For example, the ability to go to Air Assault School to earn that qualification badge.”

House panel concerned about equipment weight. The House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee wanted to know what the Army and Marine Corps were doing to lighten the weight of the equipment soldiers and marines are carrying in combat, especially in the difficult terrain of Afghanistan.

Gen. Peter Chiarelli, vice chief of staff, said the Army is modifying its physical fitness program to better prepare soldiers for deployment there while at the same time looking at ways to reduce the load—often 100 pounds or more—they carry.

In Afghanistan, the Army is “assigning physical therapists down to the brigade and battalion levels so that we have that doctor down there who’s able to work that [muscular or skeletal] injury should that injury occur.”

He added the University of Pittsburgh is gathering long-term data on orthopedic injuries suffered by deployed soldiers.

At the March 11 hearing, he introduced Staff Sgt. Fred Rowe, assigned to the 101st Airborne Division and about to deploy to Afghanistan, to the panel. Rowe was wearing the Improved Outer Tactical Vest with its protective plates and weighing about 30 pounds.

He told the subcommittee that when he was carrying everything in his kit—ammunition, grenades, etc.—that it weighed about 100 pounds.

Chiarelli said the difference between the fighting loads carried by soldiers in World War II versus now was the weight of the protective vests.

“Our sergeant here would not be alive today if he did not have those SAPI plates. I made a trip up to the Army Research Laboratory to see what they were doing to try to lighten those plates even further. And they told me, quite frankly, that it’s going to take a lot more time given the improvement in ballistics which they have to stay up on.”

The plates are not the only pieces of equipment being reviewed for weight.

“Boots, kneepads, head flashlights, ankle flashlights, assure fire magazines,” as well as batteries, are all being examined for lightening by the Rapid Equipment Task Force.

He added the Army is working with Transportation Command on improving air drops to soldiers in Afghanistan. Future drops would include robotic vehicles to help carry soldiers’ gear—particularly the protective plates—over the longer distances and greater heights of Afghanistan as opposed to Iraq. “This is going a long way in helping us get some of those pounds off our soldier’s back.”

Army addresses medical facilities’ needs. The Army surgeon general said that while the age and condition of medical treatment and research facilities remain a concern, “we have made significant steps to address facility infrastructure needs and are moving firmly in the right direction.”

Testifying March 18 before the House Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee, Lt. Gen. Eric Schoomaker cited the differences between the old Brooke Army Medical Facility at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and the one that replaced it in 1996.

The new facility “completely changed the perception of military health care in the Fort Sam Houston community and throughout the Army,” he said.

He expects four new hospitals to open in the next six years.

“Our new facilities will incorporate principles of Evidence Based Design which have been demonstrated to improve clinical outcomes, enhance patient safety, foster trust with beneficiaries and provide a satisfactory work environment for staff,” he said in a prepared testimony.

The White House announced that \$621 million from the stimulus package will go toward building a new hospital at Fort Hood.

S. Ward Cascells, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, said, “Our buildings can enable or impede the work that occurs within their walls. They can be institution in appearance, inefficient in size or configuration and not able to readily adapt to constantly evolving technology, clinical practices and patient expectations.”

In addition, the demands of providing care for soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq have brought a set of new missions to Army medicine—including Traumatic Brain Injury, psychological health and Warrior Transition complexes.

Schoomaker said about a third of Army hospitals are over 50 years old and another third are between 25 and 50 years old.

He told the panel the Army is leveraging increases in military construction fund with improved maintenance programs.

Cascells said, “Our buildings typically cost more to design, construct and operate than other facilities within the DoD inventory and must be resourced to keep pace with the increasingly dynamic world in which military medicine operates.”

Adding “Investing in our buildings tells people that we care about them. Where our facilities fall short, we send a signal that taking care of people is not a high priority.”

Establishing Fires Center of Excellence progressing.

The establishment of the U.S. Army Fires Center of Excellence (CoE) has been progressing with minimal bumps on the road, but there will have to be a balance in training soldiers to support current operations while identifying future threats.

Speaking March 14 at the Association of the United States Army's Fires Symposium and Exposition in Dallas, Texas, Maj. Gen. Peter M. Vangjel, commanding general of the Fires CoE and Fort Sill, Okla., said hybrid threat environments, such as the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza, are likely to be the norm in the future. But tackling hybrid threats will encompass several types of missions, and the challenge will be where to invest time and identify skill sets during training.

Army leaders have been focusing on five areas that will encompass future operations: major combat operations, irregular warfare, limited intervention, peacetime operations and peacetime military engagement. "We can't train soldiers in the entire spectrum," Vangjel said. The most critical hindrance is time, not money.

Vangjel said he is "graying out" the peacetime operations and circling major combat, irregular warfare and limited intervention, but he's "circling them with a rubber band."

The edges will still be flexible so leaders from noncommissioned officers to combatant commanders can adjust their focus on changing situations in the field. "This is our approach—meet current Army needs and anticipate asymmetric needs," Vangjel said.

Maj. Gen. Howard B. Bromberg, commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery Center and Fort Bliss, Texas, said Fires leaders have talked with coalition partners to expand their artillery defense capabilities, and a few of them have already planned to stand up their own firing centers.

Coalitions will be even more important in the future—"We can't do it alone," Vangjel said. Future objectives at the Fires CoE include establishing a Joint Fires University and a Joint Close Air Support Center of Excellence.

Vangjel pointed out five pillars within the Fires CoE campaign design plan:

Grow leaders. Provide agile and adaptive leaders to win the current fight.

Prepare. Integrate lessons learned, doctrine, training and support to create the best Fires force.

Transform. Deliver capabilities in a timely manner, and anticipate threats and requirements.

Engage. Promote partnerships and collaboration throughout the Fires enterprise.

Sustain. Provide Fires forces and capabilities to the current fight and the Army Force Generation Model.

Space, cyberspace vulnerability could be trouble ahead.

Space and cyberspace are two domains that are becoming more available to America's adversaries and potential adversaries, and the commander of U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command (SMDC) predicts "there is going to be some trouble" in the future.

Lt. Gen. Kevin T. Campbell told defense and industry leaders at the Association of the United States Army's Fires Symposium and Exposition in Dallas that space looms as a potential theater of conflict because "it will be available to lesser nations" as sophisticated technology becomes more broadly available.

"Sometimes we don't realize our dependence on space," Campbell said. "We expect it to be there, and we will have to defend it in the future." There are 800 satellites in orbit, and more than half belong to the United States, Campbell said.

Space and cyberspace play a huge role in military operations—such as friendly force tracking, geospatial accuracy, beyond-line-of-sight communications and precision targeting—that U.S. adversaries "are poised to deny us" because they realize that attacking those assets could be "much more effective than attacking combat systems."

The earth's orbit is so crowded that "it's as good as an attack" when two satellites collide, Campbell said.

In addition to a satellite being knocked out of service, collisions also create debris fields that interfere with communications and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. In fact, three of the worst debris clouds in space have been formed over the past three years.

"When I look at what the Army does on the battlefield, a lot of it hinges around space," Campbell said. "It makes it click."

The growth of cyberspace means adversaries have more avenues of communication, and that gives them greater means to attack, Campbell said. "The enemy is going to use it against us, and they are trying now," he said.

Also, greater demand on energy "is going to create a problem," Campbell said.

By 2030, there will probably be eight or nine countries that will be using as much energy as the United States, while today there are only one or two other countries that demand as much. Those countries will be looking to expand their energy resources.

Campbell cites the technological growth of China, and going by gross domestic product, the Chinese could match the United States in number of military forces in 20 years.

NCOs shaping training, doctrine. As the Army has recognized 2009 as the Year of the NCO, senior noncommissioned officers are shaping training and doctrine as the Fires Center of Excellence (CoE) at Fort Sill, Okla., continues the buildup as the home for training air defense artillery and field artillery soldiers.

“We have to do a lot of analysis in [military occupational specialties] to make the right decisions today because it affects what a soldier will look like three to five years from now,” Sgt. Maj. Scott R. Wilmot, proponent sergeant major of air defense artillery for the office of the chief of air defense artillery at Fort Bliss, Texas, said. “Growing NCOs and senior NCOs should be our goal.”

With the U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery Center at Fort Bliss moving to Fort Sill and becoming integrated with the Field Artillery Center under the Fires CoE, soldiers will be learning new skill sets as some military occupational specialties change to encompass air defense and field artillery skills.

“We have to find that balance while transforming the education system,” Command Sgt. Maj. Dean J. Keveles, commandant of the U.S. Army NCO Academy at Fort Sill, said.

A big part of training will be the responsibility of the NCOs themselves, Keveles said. After they leave the NCO academy, they will have to continue training in their unit, and that should have a trickle-down effect as they lead and train their soldiers.

Keveles also said soldiers will have to take advantage of technology and simulations to fill training gaps. In this period of limited resources, computer-generated training can be used in case of weather delays or lack of access to training ranges.

Command Sgt. Maj. Gary L. Hall, commandant of the Fort Bliss NCO Academy, said “tasks are migrating downward” to get NCOs ready sooner for added responsibilities.

He gave an example of the first sergeants course opening for more junior NCOs because more were being given that responsibility earlier in their careers.

Overall, the result will be “an NCO educational system based on lifelong learning objectives,” Hall said.

Emphasis shift in NCO education. The emphasis is shifting in what noncommissioned officers are expected to take from their education system—not what to think but how, Command Sgt. Maj. Ray Chandler of the Sergeants Major Academy said.

“We want them to be critical and creative thinkers, resource manager, understand leader development and see themselves as warrior leaders,” and “as professionals, we are encouraging structured self-development, truly lifelong learning,” he said. Adding, “There has to be a personal responsibility for professional self development. I think it’s going to pay big dividends” over time.

That part of the program can run from 40 to 80 hours, Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) officials said.

The academy is responsible for the Warrior Leader Course, the common core of the other stages of NCO education and the academy itself.

“The branches are responsible for what is needed at the Advanced Leader Course and the Senior Leader Course, the renamed and repositioned Basic Noncommissioned Officer and Advanced Noncommissioned Officer courses.”

He said, “We had to balance risk” in looking at course lengths. For the most part, they are now eight weeks long, but there are exceptions with the approval of the commanding general of the Training and Doctrine Command.

For example, Infantry Advanced Noncommissioned Officers Course had been three months; it is now seven weeks. “How much time is enough time?”

Command Sgt. Maj. John Sparks, USA, Ret., a special assistant to the TRADOC commander, said this shortened course length also meets the chief of staff’s goal of having soldiers not in a training situation during the first six months following a deployment. “It allows them time to re-integrate with their families.”

Although the Army Force Generation Model calls for soldiers on active duty to spend one year deployed or prepared for deployment and two years in garrison with time for NCOES, the reality is soldiers are spending 15 months to a year deployed and only slightly more than a year in garrison.