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Top officials: War in Afghanistan is winnable.

The senior American commander in Afghanistan and the U.S. ambassador to Kabul told the House and Senate Armed Services Committees that the war there was winnable with time and the scheduled arrival of more American and allied troops.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal said at the Senate hearing Dec. 8, "I absolutely believe we [with our allies and Afghan security forces] can defeat the Taliban."

Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, a former commander in Afghanistan, said the additional forces would change the momentum of the Taliban, part of the new strategy announced by President Barack Obama earlier.

As the House hearing was winding down, McChrystal said, "When an insurgency grows, it's like a fire in a house. If the fire starts and you put it out immediately in your kitchen with a small fire extinguisher. If you ignore or don't do that quickly enough and it's into several rooms, then suddenly the requirement to put the fire out has gotten larger."

He added that this is what happened in 2005 as the Taliban began reasserting control of Pashtun areas of Afghanistan. Most of these areas are in the southern and eastern part of the country and stretch along 1,000 miles of border with Pakistan.

The commander estimated there were between 24,000 and 27,000 full-time Taliban fighters. Their armament consists primarily of small and crew-served arms but includes ground-launched rockets.

Most of the Taliban are Pashtuns, and Pashtuns make up more than 40 percent of Afghanistan's population. That translates into about 12 million people. There are another 27 million Pashtuns living across the border in Pakistan. They all speak their own language, Pashto.

Reflecting ethnic sensitivity, particularly after the civil war that raged in Afghanistan in the early to mid 1990s, McChrystal added the ethnic composition of each battalion in the Afghan National Army is consistent with the ethnic mix of the country.

The caveat is the army's mix of Pashtuns from the south is below its percentage in the population.

Looking at the biggest priority, McChrystal added, "I don't believe we can finally defeat al-Qaeda until we have [succeeded in] capturing or killing" Osama bin Laden.

Afghan security forces continue to grow in numbers, expertise.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan, said the Afghan National Army should have 134,000 trained soldiers and the national police about 110,000 trained officers by October 2010. "It's not necessarily the numbers. It's the expertise," Ambassador Eikenberry said in explaining why the numbers are not higher at a recent Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, questioned McChrystal about how ready the Afghans were to partner with American and allied forces in military operations.

He said the standard for British forces in counterinsurgency operations was one unit from the United Kingdom and one from the host government. In Helmand Province, the United States had five units to a single Afghan unit, Levin added.

McChrystal said that the number disparity would be gradually reduced, but the difference would still be about three U.S. or NATO units to one Afghan unit well into 2010.

Later in answer to a question, he said, "It will take a generation or two to grow those [professional] leaders" necessary to lead those army and police units.

Despite President Hamid Karzai's inaugural address pledging to root out corruption in the government, commit more trained security forces to counter the Taliban and extend the rule of law, Eikenberry said he was concerned about that administration's ability to deliver.

While the Karzai government shows some better signs of delivering services, the national government "lacks credibility with its people," he said. The major problem is the Afghans "will never have a solution [to its security problems] without development."

He said that started with rebuilding agriculture that forms 80 percent of the economy and moving it from poppy production to other more profitable crops in the long term, such as wheat, nuts and grapes.

Eikenberry cited the contributions of the National Guard's agribusiness development teams, Department of Agriculture and the United States Agency for International Development in working in this area.

Safe havens in Pakistan complicate terrorist fight in Afghanistan. Complicating matters in developing Afghanistan's economy is the safe havens the Taliban, Jalaluddin Haqqani network and other terrorist groups have found in Pakistan, the senior military commander and the United States ambassador recently told key congressional committees.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "We have the ability to fire across the border" and coordinate with the Pakistanis when terrorists try to escape across the border. But, "We are not going across on the ground."

He said at last the Pakistanis are taking the terrorist threat more seriously as its own versions of Taliban have moved from border regions closer to Islamabad, the capital. "I am seeking the Pakistan government to be intolerant of the Haqqani network."

A former Afghan mujahedeen leader in the war against the Soviets and his sons are now allied with elements of the Taliban on both sides of the border.

Both said the Afghans do not regard the International Security Assistance Force as occupiers. Instead, "There's a nervousness about losing the NATO presence" until Afghan forces are capable of providing security, Eikenberry said.

The civilian population has to believe "we will not abandon them" as the United States did after the Soviets withdrew, and the country descended into five years of civil war and eventual Taliban rule.

"How we are viewed will depend on how we operate," the commander said. "The Afghans want to be protected by Afghans," but they understood why allied forces are present.

McChrystal said he was not troubled at setting a July 2011 date to begin transferring responsibility to the Afghans. Later in answer to a question at the Senate hearing, he said, "the only question [about withdrawal] is how many, how fast."

A number of Republican legislators, including Arizona Sen. John McCain, ranking member of the Senate committee, said that by setting a date to end a military operation or begin withdrawing the United States was sending a wrong message.

Although he was heartened by Defense Secretary Robert Gates' statement to troops in Afghanistan that "We are in this to win," McCain said, "It matters immensely the signal we send."

At the House hearing defining victory and defeat differs in this war from others, McChrystal said. "So rather than wipe out every Taliban member, what we need to do is lower their capacity to the point where, within their own means, Afghanistan can hold them from being a major threat to either their way of life or their government."

After adjusting, National Guard ag business teams report progress in Afghanistan. The commander of one of the National Guard's agribusiness development teams in Khost Province Afghanistan said, "We've made good progress in a short time," but to do that he and his soldiers had to adjust to the realities of life there.

Col. Brian Copes, of the Indiana National Guard's 1-19th Agribusiness Development Team, added, in a telephone interview from Afghanistan, the realities are, "everybody has an agenda, and I don't say that in a bad way," referring to the business and political ends of their projects. "To me the most familiar to me are the people. People are people."

This means coming to grips with basic questions of understanding how the Afghans think, how they work, how they decide; do they like to be pushed or prodded. It also means going well beyond the agricultural part of the mission.

In a recent team newsletter, he wrote that that is the people piece of governance, and it is as important as the process of governance. The idea is build the capabilities of the Afghans to provide basic services.

In early December as the Obama administration unveiled its new strategy for Afghanistan, economic development, especially in agriculture, was to play a key role in going forward.

In the forefront of re-building Afghanistan's agriculturally-based economy now is the National Guard's agribusiness development teams. The teams are not the permanent answer to restoring Afghanistan's ability to feed its citizens and restoring its food exporting legacy.

As security improves, the administration's plan is for civilians from the Department of Agriculture and the United States Agency for International Development build on the work done by the National Guard teams.

Before deploying, Copes and his soldiers received specialized cultural training on the Pashtuns specifically from Indiana University in Bloomington and agricultural training for Afghanistan from Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., and Tillers International in southwestern Michigan.

Although as the first Indiana team, the soldiers could also draw on the experiences of the teams that preceded them into Afghanistan and they would not be alone when they put their boots on the ground.

National Guard officials said there were about 400 guardsmen from five states other than Indiana serving on teams this year. The idea for the teams came from the Missouri National Guard in 2007 with the strong support of the Missouri Farm Bureau and Lt. Gen. Clyde Vaughn, who served in the Missouri National Guard and as the director of the Army National Guard.

Afghans welcome presence of ag development teams. The 64-soldier team from the Indiana National Guard arrived in this eastern province of Afghanistan, bordered on two sides by Pakistan, at the tail end of February. Sixteen of the guardsmen were picked for their agricultural expertise. The others are providing security.

Overall, the Afghans “welcome our presence here,” and the guardsmen attempts to communicate and work with them. “They appreciated that.” But there was some hesitation, Col. Brian Copes, commander of the agribusiness development team said in a telephone interview.

One night early on, Copes said two of the four Afghans he hired had been approached by the Taliban. “You are in danger if you work with the Americans,” a letter dropped off at night warned. The threats are real, including roadside bombs and mortar attacks.

Regaining control of Khost is an important Taliban goal, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of forces in Afghanistan, testified in early December. There the Taliban works with the Haqqani network, led by former mujahedeen commander Jalaluddin Haqqani and his sons, in expanding the insurgency. To get around, the soldiers move in Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles.

Describing a meeting that took place a day before the interview, Copes said that he hosted a variety of Afghan education and agriculture officials to go over what they have been doing and to introduce them to the leaders of the next Indiana National Guard team that will replace his soldiers as 2009 ends.

Guardsmen realize these teams are not the long-range solution. Col. Martin Leppert, who directs the teams from the National Guard Bureau, told attendees at the Association of the United States Army’s Annual Meeting, the teams have not gone head-to-head with the poppy growing southern provinces. “We’re after the fence-sitters” and showing them that growing grapes can be more profitable over time than poppy.

“USDA [Department of Agriculture] should be the lead agency. Someone has got to do it. The Army is doing it now. We are the bridging strategy” until the Department of Agriculture and the United States Agency for International Development can replace them when the countryside, the traditional Taliban stronghold, is secure and Afghan farmers feel free to grow crops other than poppy.

Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, wrote recently: “Through the years, Afghan farmers have found it profitable to grow poppies, which are used to make heroin. The funding from this illicit drug trade has enabled the Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists.” In working with Afghan farmers, the National Guard teams are helping to undermine their economic base.

USDA looks to build Afghans’ capacity in market economy. “Afghanistan farmers know how to grow potatoes,” but the role Department of Agriculture’s foreign agriculture services sees for itself there is building their farmer’s capacity to operate in a market economy.

Babette Gainor said that translates into showing the farmers the advantages of separating their harvest by size, teaching them about operating a market and the advantages of cold storage. “The Afghans lead the process” in determining what works best for them. “We are there providing some guidance, a bit more structure.”

Fourteen of the services’ 900 employees are now in Afghanistan, but that number will increase to more than 60. They are part of the long-term solution to rebuilding Afghanistan’s primarily agricultural economy and moving them away from poppy production that is later processed into opium and heroin.

Gainor said that candidates apply for openings; and if they are accepted, her office details them. It is a process that has grown since the spring of 2009 when President Barack Obama announced his administration’s interest in sending more government civilians to work with the Afghans.

Jacob Lew, deputy secretary of state for management and resources, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in early December that 900 civilians from a number of federal agencies would be working in Afghanistan by early 2010 and another 20 to 30 percent more would be added in the following year.

“We need more civilian expertise on the ground, particularly in agriculture, and our State Department is stepping up to meet that challenge,” Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told foreign journalists at a special briefing in Washington. Eighty percent of the country’s economy is based on agriculture.

“It’s very important to remember the multiplier effect that civilian personnel have. On average each civilian leverages 10 partners, ranging from locally employed Afghan staff to experts who work with U.S.-funded NGOs [non-governmental organizations],” Lew said.

In distinguishing between the military and the civilian presence, he added, “The numbers are very different” when dots on a map represent the military and the civilian presence in an area. “You put one agricultural specialist in a town, surrounded by the appropriate Afghan, you know, support, that’s a program. You don’t need a battalion of agricultural experts in a town.”

She said the reaction of the National Guard’s agribusiness development teams to USDA’s civilians has been encouraging with a “how can we incorporate your expertise.” It is similar to the way the guardsmen work with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

Soldiers detail experiences of ag team in Afghanistan. As soldiers assigned to the Indiana National Guard's 1-19th Agribusiness development Team discovered soon after arriving in Afghanistan, one of the biggest challenges they would face over the next 10 months was the pace.

Maj. Shawn Gardner, the operations officer, said in an exchange of e-mails to questions posed by AUSA NEWS, "Coming from a microwave society, we are used to things happening quickly and with results," but to get ahead in Afghanistan it meant establishing realistic expectations.

For Sgt. 1st Class Brendan Wilczynski in the force protection and security platoon, it also meant adapting infantry skills to a different kind of mission. He wrote, that the security platoon "needed to adjust not only our mindsets but our TTPs [tactics, techniques and procedures] to be more in line with the development intent of this mission. Training and education were fundamental in adapting our skills."

Even though the soldiers had worked with cultural experts at Indiana University and agriculture experts at Purdue University, as well as having gone through pre-mobilization training at Camp Atterbury, Ind., "There was no real template to go off for necessary equipment," Sgt. Maj. Scott Bassett, marketing subject matter expert, wrote.

To get through this, he and others in the agriculture section brain-stormed over what would be needed as standard equipment. The special needs presented special challenges. "You can't just order five gallons of animal lube through Army supply channels."

What impressed, Maj. Ronald Crane, education subject matter expert, was how the team with its differing levels of education and experience came together. "Slowly we began to chip away at the unknown and develop a clearer picture of the agricultural situation."

The team's work was largely "outside the wire," creating a series of force protection challenges. For the security platoon, Wilczynski said it was "an environment we are used to operating in" with an important difference. All missions were close contact with the Afghans. "We had to maintain access with the Afghan people to those individuals we were sent here to protect."

Bassett agreed, saying the subject matter experts "all want to look or assess different subjects on any given mission." Crane wrote they expected "to operate in fields, villages, bazaars, markets and government facilities" and each presented a different challenge. "The tremendously professional and experienced NCOs of the force protection and security platoon adapted proven doctrine into our mission in an exemplary manner."

Life at Camp Salerno is as diverse as the units' missions. Indiana National Guard soldiers from the 38th Infantry Division's Task Force Cyclone ensure Forward Operating Base Salerno is maintained properly.

Located in eastern Afghanistan, Salerno is near the Pakistan border and is home to four different elements of the Indiana National Guard. The 1-19th Indiana Agribusiness Development Team; B Company, 2nd Battalion, 151st Infantry Regiment; the 177th Finance Company; and the 38th Infantry Division's Task Force Cyclone, who run base operations, reside at Salerno during their deployment.

The commander for Salerno base operations, Lt. Col. Rodney Babb, said the work his team does surpasses the expectations of all who live on post. "The performance of Task Force Cyclone service members has been outstanding," said Babb, an Indianapolis resident. "Their effort to go the extra mile surpasses the needs of our tenants and improves the quality-of-life support services."

Army Spc. David Lillian and Spc. Devin Blankenship, both Indianapolis residents, said their work is difficult, but worthwhile, as soldiers coming and going on a day-to-day basis are the ones who benefit the most from their efforts.

"It boosts morale," Lillian said. "[When] you live in a house, you like to have your house clean. This is our house, and we keep it clean."

Blankenship said his rural upbringing contributes to his desire to do his part in keeping the base clean. "I grew up in the country, so I don't like having mess and filth, and I'm sure nobody else does," he said.

Each soldier supervises a crew of 10 to 12 local Afghans who perform a multitude of tasks each working day. Tasks range from filling sandbags and pulling weeds to preparing billeting and building projects.

The specialists both had high praise for the Afghans' work ethic and how they engage in each job. "They're great. They don't mess around. You show them something, and they do it," Lillian said. "I like these guys. Some of them have been [working on the base] for five years."

On this particular day, the crews were removing weeds and trash from around the base, which are mundane jobs, but crucial for the health of all who live in and around the area. "The weeds are an issue because of the rodents," Blankenship explained. "We have a lot of mice, rats, lizards and snakes here, especially in the summertime. There are all kinds of different diseases out here. We don't want anything to help feed that."