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General Urges Foreigners to Aid Afghans

By ERIC SCHMITT

FORT BRAGG, N.C., July 8 — The former top American general in Afghanistan warned today that the nation's recovery was imperiled unless the international community takes bolder steps in the rebuilding efforts there.

The officer, Lt. Gen. Daniel K. McNeill of the Army, said that security in Afghanistan, while still precarious, was the best it has been in decades and that it would improve if the nation's weak economy gets badly needed foreign assistance for large-scale projects like roads.

He acknowledged that he disagreed with civilians, including the United Nations special representative to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, who insist that security must improve to attract more donors.

"We need to move more quickly and get projects out into the hinterlands," he said in his first lengthy interview since stepping down on May 27 after a year as commander of 11,000 troops in Afghanistan, including 9,000 Americans.

In a wide-ranging conversation here at his XVIII Airborne Corps headquarters, General McNeill said he did not believe the war in Iraq or the rebuilding effort there had unduly drained away resources or political will from tasks in Afghanistan. He also played down concerns that Afghanistan's regional warlords were gaining too much influence.

A series of raids over the last year disrupted the ability of the Taliban or Al Qaeda to regroup, the general said, but the operations snared only lower and middle-level fighters, "low-hanging fruit." The fate of Osama bin Laden is a mystery, General McNeill said, adding that in April the last piece of seemingly hard intelligence about the location of Mullah Muhammad Omar, the former Taliban leader, turned out to be bogus.

One problem, he said, has been the inability or unwillingness of tens of thousands of Pakistani forces in the semiautonomous tribal areas along the border to patrol more aggressively or coordinate their missions with the Americans.

As elusive guerrilla fighters continue their attacks against occupation forces, General McNeill said the resistance still posed a serious threat to the fragile government of President Hamid Karzai.

He expressed amazement at the ingenuity of some Qaeda and Taliban diehards. After one clash in January, he said, American soldiers found a cow, donkeys, food and a kitchen big enough to feed 40 people behind a false wall inside a cave.

Given the security conditions, General McNeill said he anticipated no major changes in the size or shape of the American force in Afghanistan until possibly next summer, when 9,000 members of an Afghan national army, trained by occupation forces, are to be ready to conduct patrols and monitor borders.

The program got off to a rocky start last year when many recruits quit before basic training was finished, complaining of homesickness and the paltry \$30 a month the United States was paying them. For their part, the trainers were discouraged that few Pashtuns volunteered. But now, General McNeill said, the program has picked up momentum, and has graduated 4,000 soldiers.

Still, it is unclear when the American forces can hand off more responsibility. Perhaps mindful of Afghans' traditional aversion to foreign troops, General McNeill predicted the Pentagon could begin reducing the number of American troops by next summer.

He offered few new details about two controversies that happened on his watch. He expressed regret over scores of civilian casualties from an airstrike last July that hit a wedding party. He said today that legitimate military targets inside the compound had fired on American aircraft. He declined to comment on the deaths of two men in American custody in the Bagram detention center last December, saying the inquiry has not been completed.

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