

THE LONG HAUL

Results in Afghanistan suggest extended U.S. troop mission

By **ROBERT BURNS**
AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON — America's longest war, now in its 15th year, is long on official U.S. optimism about building a self-reliant Afghan army but short on convincing evidence that the goal will be reached anytime soon.

That is the backdrop to President Barack Obama's decision to extend the U.S. military mission beyond his last day in the White House, giving still more time to train and advise the Afghan army and keep up the hunt for remnants of the al-Qaida network whose Sept. 11 attacks drew U.S. forces to Afghanistan in 2001. Just last year Obama had said the outlook was so encouraging that only an embassy-based military oversight office would remain after January 2017.

It looks different now, and not as encouraging.

"The bottom line is, in key areas of the country, the security situation is still very fragile, and in some places there is risk of deterioration," Obama said Thursday in announcing what he called a calculated adjustment to his plan.

Supporters of prolonging the U.S. presence say it is necessary to secure Afghanistan's future and keep al-Qaida and other extremist groups at bay. Others question whether keeping nearly 10,000 U.S. troops there in 2016 and then holding at 5,500 troops beyond that will make a significant difference, given the uneven results from 14 years of efforts to build and professionalize an Afghan army and police force paid for largely by the United States.

This year the Pentagon spent \$4.1 billion to train, equip and sustain the Afghan army and police. That is no ordinary package of assistance. It included feeding soldiers, paying their salaries and fueling their vehicles. The Pentagon is asking Congress for another \$3.7 billion for the coming year.



A U.S. soldier directs his colleague at the site of a bomb attack that targeted several armored vehicles belonging to forces attached to the NATO Resolute Support Mission, in downtown of Kabul, Afghanistan, on Oct. 11.

No doubt the Afghan army has improved over the years, and its soldiers do not shy away from combat. But the army still suffers basic flaws. Just days ago the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Campbell, told a congressional committee that Afghan forces are unable to fight without U.S. support, that "we have just started" creating an Afghan air force, and that "it will take time" to develop competent Afghan battle commanders.

But how much time? And at what cost? The U.S. already has spent about \$65 billion on the training and equipping of Afghan forces, and it remains difficult to judge what that investment has bought. Year after year, in public statements and periodic updates to Congress, Pentagon officials have insisted the Afghan army and police were getting better, suggesting success was just around the corner if Americans would remain patient.

"Every day the Afghan security forces grow in capability and experience," a Pentagon spokesman asserted in October 2005.

"We have achieved great

success with the Afghan National Army," a two-star general in charge of training said in October 2007.

"The capabilities of the Afghan National Army are improving steadily," and the police are "making steady progress," the Pentagon said in a June 2008 report to Congress. A year later a Pentagon update said the Afghan force "continued to improve its capability."

And in 2010 the Pentagon told Congress that growth and development of security forces "are among Afghanistan's most promising areas of progress."

The Afghans have progressed to the point where they do their own basic military training. What they still need from the U.S. is more high-end training, advising and mentoring as they attempt to tie together all elements of military operations, including the use of intelligence, against the Taliban.

In the last few years, as U.S. forces have shifted the combat role almost entirely to the Afghans, the Taliban have made new gains. Campbell, while acknowledging those gains, says the mili-

itants still cannot overthrow the government in Kabul. But earlier this month they surprised many by briefly capturing the key northern city of Kunduz.

The combat burden has taken a heavy toll on Afghan forces. Last fall a senior U.S. commander said Afghan troops were dying at a rate that was "not sustainable," and the combat losses have only accelerated this year, according to the Pentagon's latest report to Congress.

The high casualty rate, in turn, has left Afghan forces short-handed. Although the army is authorized to have 195,000 soldiers, it currently has only 173,000.

Overall losses to the force — known in military parlance as attrition and including those who do not re-enlist, are killed in battle or are dropped from the rolls after being AWOL for 30 days — is down slightly this year after averaging 2.1 percent per month last year. Even with the recent decline in attrition to 1.8 percent a month, the loss rates are so high they "pose challenges to creating a professional force," the Pentagon says.



In this April photo, a small boat crosses in front of the Transocean Polar Pioneer as it arrives in Port Angeles, Wash. aboard a transport ship after traveling across the Pacific before its eventual Arctic destination.

Interior Department curbs future Arctic offshore drilling

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — The Interior Department announced Friday it is canceling future lease sales and will not extend current leases in Arctic waters off Alaska's northern coast, a decision that significantly reduces the chances for future Arctic offshore drilling.

The news follows a Sept. 28 announcement by Royal Dutch Shell that it would cease exploration in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas after spending upward of \$7 billion on Arctic exploration. The company cited disappointing results from a well drilled in the Chukchi and the unpredictable federal regulatory environment.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said the federal government is canceling federal petroleum lease sales in U.S. Arctic waters that were scheduled for 2016 and 2017.

"In light of Shell's announcement, the amount of acreage already under lease and current market conditions, it does not make sense to prepare for lease sales in the Arctic in the next year and a half," she said.

Jewell said the Chukchi Sea off Alaska's northwest coast and the Beaufort Sea off the state's north coast will not be included in the agency's next five-year lease sale plan. In addition, current leases held by Shell and other companies in

Arctic waters will not be extended.

Beaufort Sea leases are set to expire in 2017, and Chukchi Sea leases in 2020.

Current market conditions and low industry interest made the leasing decision easier, Jewell said in a release.

Royal Dutch Shell PLC is the only company actively exploring off Alaska's northern costs. It had applied to extend leases in both the Chukchi and the Beaufort. Statoil requested an extension for Chukchi leases.

Shell spokesman Curtis Smith said the company disagrees with the agency's decision not to extend current leases.

"When it comes to frontier exploration in Alaska, one size does not fit all," Smith said by email. "We continue to believe the 10-year primary lease term needs to be extended."

In denying the extension, the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement's regional supervisor for field operations, Kevin Pendergast, said Shell had not met the criteria to extend its leases, including providing the agency with a work schedule on them. Shell could apply again, he said.

Environmental groups strongly oppose Arctic drilling. They say industrial activity will harm marine mammals already hurt by a loss of sea ice.

BRIEFLY

Turkish jets shoot down drone at its border with Syria

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkey shot down an unidentified drone that flew into its airspace Friday near the Syrian border, while Russian President Vladimir Putin said his country's air campaign backing a Syrian government offensive has killed hundreds of militants.

A U.S. official said the downed drone was Russian, but Moscow staunchly rejected the claim.

The incident underlined the potential dangers of clashes involving Russian, Syrian and U.S.-led coalition planes in the increasingly crowded skies over Syria. Russian and U.S. military officials have been working on a set of rules to prevent any problems.

The Turkish military

said it issued three warnings before shooting down the aircraft with its fighter jets. It didn't specify how it had relayed the warnings to the operators of the drone.

The drone crashed about 2 miles inside Turkish territory, said Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioglu.

Earlier this month, Turkey had protested two incursions by Russian warplanes, which also drew strong condemnation from Turkey's NATO allies.

The U.S., Russia and the Syrian government all operate drones in the region.

The drone was definitely not American, and the U.S. believes it was Russian, said a U.S. defense official, who was not authorized to discuss details of the incident and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Moscow strongly denied ownership of the drone.

4 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire in unrest

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Stone-throwing protests erupted across the West Bank and Gaza on Friday, and assailants firebombed a site revered by Jews as the tomb of biblical Joseph on a "day of rage" against Israel. Four Palestinians were killed by Israeli fire, including a laborer disguised as a journalist who stabbed an Israeli soldier.

The U.N. Security Council convened an emergency meeting to discuss the escalation, which has been marked by a spate of Palestinian stabbing attacks and an Israeli security crackdown. Troops manned roadblocks in Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem, a center of unrest.

EAST OREGONIAN **Hermiston Herald**

Veterans Day Tribute

They've served our country with courage and honor. They've left behind loved ones to risk their lives in protecting their country. They've defended our freedoms and ideals. They make us proud to be Americans.

Join us for Veterans Day, Wednesday, November 11, 2015 in the East Oregonian and Hermiston Herald, as we honor the men and women of the U.S. Military. Their courage, hard work and sacrifice are the backbone of our nation, protecting freedom, liberty, justice and all we hold dear.

Bring in or call 1-800-522-0255 with a photo and message to your hero to give them a special thanks.

DEADLINE
Wednesday, November 5th


For more information call Paula at 541-278-2678 or 1-800-522-0255 or Hermiston Herald at 541-564-4530.

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Bring us a picture of your servicemen or servicewomen or veteran by **November 5th** along with the form below and we will include them in our "Veterans Day Salute" on November 11th in the East Oregonian and Hermiston Herald at no charge.

For more information, call Paula at 1-800-522-0255 or Hermiston Herald at 541-564-4530.



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