

Afghanistan Defense Minister Plans Troop 'Surge'

Afghanistan's defense minister is planning a training surge that would increase the number of Afghan soldiers available to fight the Taliban and al-Qaida by as much as 20 percent by the time the weather improves in the spring.

Afghanistan's Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak mentioned the plan Wednesday during a meeting with the top U.S. military commander in the region, Admiral William Fallon. The minister provided details later in a VOA interview.

"Actually, the purpose is that we should be able to have more troops when the fighting season comes," he said.

The minister says he wants to increase the number of troops trained during the next several months. The extra 5,000 recruits, in addition to 10,000 already scheduled to be trained, would bring the total size of the Afghan National Army close to 70,000. Until recently, that was the target figure for the army's total size, but the U.S. recently agreed to support a request from Kabul for an army of 80,000.

While the new troops are being trained, the minister says, his forces will try to break Afghanistan's traditional pattern of military lull during the winter and move against the Taliban and al-Qaida.

"We will try to continue to do operations during the winter to stop their command and control and also entrap their communications, and all that, and to try to neutralize their capability to try to launch a spring offensive. But generally, I think it will be a fighting season when the snow melts, so we will have more ANA [Afghan National Army] available to deal with the situation," added Wardak.

Wardak says Afghan National Army troops are gaining experience and skill every day, and should be given more responsibility on the country's battlefields. He says some NATO countries do not work as well with his forces as he would like, and it should be "mandatory" for NATO troops in Afghanistan to increase their cooperation with the country's army.

Wardak wants Afghanistan to end its need for foreign forces as soon as

possible, but U.S. officials say they want to be careful not to give the Afghan military more responsibility than it is ready to handle.

Admiral Fallon met with the Afghan minister as part of a 30-hour visit designed to help him write an assessment of the situation in Afghanistan six years after the U.S.-led invasion. The admiral says the assessment is to include recommendations on what the U.S. can do to be more effective in helping stabilize Afghanistan and reduce its need for foreign military help.

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