

Nato seeking help to train Afghan army

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Nato is seeking contributions from Muslim nations for its military force in Afghanistan, hoping Arab nations in North Africa and the Middle East could help train Afghan army units for the fight against the Taliban, a top allied commander said.

"Would we like to have greater involvement of Muslim nations? You bet," said US General John Craddock, the supreme allied commander for operations.

Concerns that their soldiers would be drawn into fighting fellow Muslims have made Islamic nations reluctant to send troops to join the Nato-led force of 41,000 in Afghanistan.

However, Craddock told a think tank dinner late on Tuesday he was hopeful North African and Middle Eastern nations would provide teams of military experts as part of a growing program to train Afghan military units.

"They are interested," Craddock said.

"We're going to send a team down to Egypt very shortly, so I think there are some possibilities here."

Nato sees that training program as a key part of its strategy to prepare the Afghan army to replace international troops. However, alliance headquarters has struggled to persuade its own 26 members to provide the operational mentoring and liaison teams, known as OMLTs, to embed with Afghan army units.

A drive to find more in recent weeks has resulted in a rise in the number of units deployed or planned to about 30.

But Nato's target is 46 and growing as more Afghan battalions or 'kandaks' are put together.

Craddock hopes Muslim nations could help fill the gap, despite the fact that some Nato training teams embedded with Afghan units have been involved in fighting with the Taliban.

Three predominantly Muslim nations already have troops serving with the Nato force; alliance member Turkey has 1,220 troops there, Albania has 138 and Azerbaijan 22.

Nato's embedded training teams are small, ranging from around a dozen to 50, but Craddock stressed their importance.

"The embedded OMLTs and the training they provide is the most important contribution Nato is making in providing security and stability in Afghanistan," he said.

"It is our best investment in Afghanistan's successful future."

Afghan units in eastern Afghanistan have recently taken the lead in some operations against the Taliban, with US support. However, Nato commanders estimate it would take up to 10 years before the Afghans could stand alone.

Craddock, who has overall command of Nato troops in Afghanistan, also complained that several European nations are slow in coming forward with more troops to strengthen the mission, particularly in the southern and eastern regions that have been the focus of much of the renewed fighting over the past two years.

He said the shortfalls in manoeuvre units and air transport were making it difficult for Nato to hold onto ground taken from the Taliban, forcing commanders to take a "whack-a-mole response," racing from one area to another to tackle the insurgents where they emerge.

On a visit to Brussels, Mohammad Arif Noorzai, deputy speaker of Afghanistan's parliament, dismissed any threat of an imminent ground offensive by the Taliban.