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U.S. will Adjust to Canadian Afghan Departure: Mullen

by Jeff Davis

During a Tuesday press conference with America's top military commander, Chief of Defence Staff Walter Natynczyk indicated Canada will go along with NATO plans to step up the fight against Afghanistan's drug industry.

Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the U.S. joint chiefs of staff, also endorsed the new NATO orders instructing alliance members to step up the fight against drug traffickers.

In late January, the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* published a "guidance" penned by U.S. General John Craddock, who currently holds NATO's top military post of Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

The classified document tells commanders "to attack directly drug producers and facilities throughout Afghanistan."

"[It is] no longer necessary to produce intelligence or other evidence that each particular drug trafficker or narcotics facility in Afghanistan meets the criteria of being a military objective," Gen. Craddock wrote, adding that drug traffickers and narcotics facilities are "inextricably linked to the Opposing Military Forces, and may be attacked."

The order, however, has been extremely controversial as international conventions ban the use of military force against civilians, which would include criminals not linked to a fighting force. Individual countries reportedly have the right to opt out of the order.

Admiral Mullen called these "necessary changes," and said the "drug issue fuels the insurgency."

Gen. Natynczyk said he agreed "absolutely" with his counterpart, and "at this point in time we are waiting for the commander of ISAF to go out to the regional command with his guidance with regards to these instructions."

"We know the strong nexus between terrorism and the poppy crop, and therefore there is an effort out there to... target criminal activity."

Gen. Natynczyk added that the Canadian Forces will receive further instructions from current ISAF commander American Gen. David McKiernan. He did not indicate whether Canadian Forces in Afghanistan have already stepped up attacks against drug dealers.

Extension Not Discussed

Admiral Mullen was in Ottawa to meet with Gen. Natynczyk and discuss Canada-U.S. military relations. He said the issue of Canada's planned military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2011, the proverbial elephant in the room, was not discussed during the meeting.

"I'm aware that 2011 is out there, but, literally, I have not discussed that policy or the impacts of it with Gen. Natynczyk or any government leaders here today," he said.

"In the fights we're in, having partners like [Canada] is absolutely vital," the admiral added. "But it is for the government of Canada to make that decision, not for me or anybody in my country."

While repeatedly praising the Canadian Forces, Admiral Mullen said American forces would be able to fight the war in Afghanistan without Canadian assistance.

"If it is the intent of Canada, as stated right now, to leave in 2011, we'll adjust," he said. "And I think adjust in a way that we'll be able to meet a very difficult and challenging insurgency."

Meanwhile, Admiral Mullen said the planned "surge" of tens of thousands more American troops into Afghanistan will not begin until President Barack Obama and his staff finish a comprehensive review of American strategy in Afghanistan.

He said the president has "laid out a period of about the next couple months" to complete the strategic review, which he said "will put us all in position to take significant co-ordinated, synchronized steps forward."

Admiral Mullen predicted, however, that the surge would be roughly 30,000-troops strong, and would "generally be heavily focused in the east and south [of Afghanistan] where the biggest demand exists for providing security."

"Security in Kandahar and Helmand specifically has got to be improved dramatically," he said. "And it has got to be enough forces to be able not just to clear, but we've got to have enough forces in there to hold, which we haven't had in the past."

Both Gen. Natynczyk and Admiral Mullen predicted 2009 would be a tough year in Afghanistan due to August elections, as well as the general level of violence, which the American commander said was "way up."

Admiral Mullen also emphasized the need for greater efforts on the civilian aspects of the mission, particularly in improving governance.

"The governance piece is probably the most critical piece right now," he said. "I think the lack of governance tied to the corruption that exists is going to be the number one challenge."

"All of the countries who are involved in Afghanistan, we need to surge civilian capacity...in order to help build governance at local, district, provincial and national levels," he said. "That's our biggest shortfall."

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