

By Gareth Porter

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Although Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal's plan for wresting the Afghan provinces of Helmand and Kandahar from the Taliban is still in its early stages of implementation, there are already signs that setbacks and obstacles it has encountered have raised serious doubts among top military officials in Washington about whether the plan is going to work.

Scepticism about McChrystal's ambitious aims was implicit in the way the Pentagon report on the war issued Apr. 26 assessed the progress of the campaign in Marja. Now, as Afghan President Hamid Karzai begins a four-day round of consultations with President Barack Obama and other senior U.S. officials here this week, the new report has been given even more pointed expression by an unnamed "senior military official" quoted in a column in the Washington Post Sunday by David Ignatius.

The senior military officer criticised McChrystal's announcement in February that he had "a government in a box, ready to roll in" for the Marja campaign, for having created "an expectation of rapidity and efficiency that doesn't exist now", according to Ignatius.

The same military official is also quoted as pointing out that parts of Helmand that were supposed to have been cleared by the offensive in February and March are in fact still under Taliban control and that Afghan government performance in the wake of the offensive had been disappointing, according to Ignatius.

The outlook at the Pentagon and the White House on the nascent Kandahar offensive is also pessimistic, judging from the comment to Ignatius by an unnamed "senior administration official". The official told Ignatius the operation is "still a work in progress", observing that McChrystal's command was still trying to decide how much of the local government the military could "salvage" and how much "you have to rebuild".

That is an obvious reference to the dilemma faced by the U.S. military in Kandahar: the entire government structure is controlled by Ahmed Wali Karzai, the much-despised brother of President Hamid Karzai. The U.S.-supported provincial governor now being counted on to introduce governance reforms, on the other hand, is generally regarded by Kandaharis as powerless, as Jonathan Partlow reported in the Washington Post Apr. 29.

These negative comments on the campaign in Helmand and Kandahar by senior Washington officials pointing to problems with McChrystal's plan suggest that even more serious concerns

are being expressed behind the scenes.

The Pentagon report on the war betrays similar doubts about the strategy being carried out by McChrystal, both by what it highlights and what it fails to say. Damning with faint praise, the report says the offensive waged in the Marja region and elsewhere in Helmand achieved only "some success in clearing insurgents from their strongholds".

Paralleling the quote from the "senior military official", the report says progress in "governance and development" in has been "slow". Demonstrating that the Afghan government could provide "governance and development" had been announced as the central aim of the offensive in Marja.

The section of the Pentagon report on the state of the insurgency goes even further toward declaring that the McChrystal plan had failed to achieve a central objective, concluding that the Taliban strategy for countering the offensive "has proven effective in slowing the spread of governance and development".

The key finding is that the Taliban have "reinfilitrated the cleared areas" of Helmand and "dissuaded locals from meeting with the Afghan government" by executing some who had initially collaborated.

The overall negative tone of the analysis of what happened in Helmand appears to reflect a decision by Pentagon officials to withhold its vote of confidence in the McChrystal war plan.

The only feature of McChrystal's strategy which the Pentagon report treats as having proven effective against the insurgents is its most controversial element: the programme of Special Operations Forces (SOF) night raids against suspected Taliban in their homes, which has stirred anger among Afghans everywhere the SOF have operated.

In an indirect expression of doubt about the impact of the McChrystal strategy, the report suggests that the willingness of Taliban insurgent leaders to negotiate will be influenced not by the offensives aimed at separating the population from the Taliban but by the "combined effects" of the high-level arrests of Taliban leaders in Pakistan and targeted raids by special operations forces against "lower level commanders".

In fact, Taliban leaders have already indicated a readiness to negotiate, although not on terms the Barack Obama administration is yet prepared to accept.

McChrystal appears to have responded to the setbacks he has encountered in Helmand and Kandahar by setting aside his most ambitious counterinsurgency aim: the creation of a large zone of control covering both provinces. In late January, an official working for McChrystal at the ISAF told IPS, "The first thing you'll see is an effort to establish a contiguous security zone in Helmand and Kandahar accounting for 85 percent of the economic resources."

McChrystal referred to that same aim in his interview with the Financial Times published Jan. 25. "If we can protect 85 percent of the people and deny access to them from the insurgents, it's

pretty hard for them to have a significant effect," he said.

But since the end of the Marja operation, neither McChrystal nor any other ISAF official has said anything about a plan to establish a "contiguous security zone".

McChrystal has to provide a one-year assessment of the progress of his strategy in December 2010, and senior administration officials told the Washington Post in late March that he will have to show that the "overall transition to stability and vastly improved governance" has been completed by that time.

McChrystal was confident in a talk in Kabul in late January excerpted in a NATO video that, by December, he would be able to "show with hard numbers and things, real progress".

But the failure to clear Taliban guerrillas from areas where they have been strongest, along with the inability to break the power of Karzai's brother in Kandahar and the absence of support from the population and tribal elders for military occupation in the province, is likely to make administration officials highly sceptical of such a case.

McChrystal's staff has made no secret of their hope to convince the U.S. public that his strategy is making such progress in Helmand and Kandahar that it should be extended past mid-2011, when President Obama has said he would begin a U.S. military withdrawal and transition to Afghan responsibility for security.

After interviewing members of McChrystal's team in Kabul, pro-war journalist Robert Kaplan wrote in the April issue of Atlantic magazine, "The very prospect of some success by July 2011 increases the likelihood that U.S. forces will be in Afghanistan in substantial numbers for years."

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