

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH DAVID S. SEDNEY, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA; AND BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON, JR., DIRECTOR, PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN COORDINATION CELL, JOINT STAFF

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT OBAMA'S NEWLY ANNOUNCED AFGHANISTAN STRATEGY

TIME: 9:00 P.M. EST

DATE: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2009

.STX

(Note: Please refer to [www.dod.mil](http://www.dod.mil) for more information.)

LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday, December 1st, 2009. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call.

Since we have so many bloggers and online journalists on the call, please remember to clearly state your name and the organization you're with prior to asking your questions.

And since we have so many folks on the line, please limit it to one question so we can respect everyone else's time.

With that, I'd like to welcome our guests today. Our guests are Mr. David S. Sedney, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, and Brigadier General John Nicholson, director of Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell, Joint Staff.

Both gentlemen will be talking about the U.S.-Afghanistan policy. We'll go ahead and get started with Brigadier General Nicholson.

Sir, the floor is yours, if you'd like to start.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Great. Thanks very much, Jennifer. And by way of introduction, my name's Brigadier General Mick Nicholson and, as Jennifer said, director of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell for all of the last two and a half weeks.

So prior to that I was the deputy commanding general in Regional Command South in southern Afghanistan since last November, of '08, and prior to that was a brigade commander in eastern Afghanistan in '06 and '07.

So I just mention that by way of background so that if you wish to get into some of the tactical aspects of the operations, I'd be happy to do that.

First, I would just want to say thank you to all of you for participating tonight. We really appreciate your interest in this. And

as Jennifer mentioned, if we don't get to all of your questions, I'd ask you to please pass those to her and then we'll do our best to respond to you later, in order to get you the information that you're looking for.

And I've just been joined by Mr. David Sedney. Just -- we'll go ahead and jump into the questions, but he is here and we'll get started.

So please, let's go ahead, Jennifer.

Hello?

LT. CRAGG: Yes, two more people just joined us. Can I please get your names, please?

Q Sure. Bruce Henderson, New Ledger. Sorry for being late.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. And who was the next person, please?

Q Taylor Kuen (ph) from the Navy Memorial's (Navy ?) Log Blog.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Taylor. Let's go ahead and get started.

Tony, you're first. Go ahead.

Q Okay. Hi. Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News, sitting here in the Pentagon. One quick question.

Can you explain a little more clearly the significance and what will happen in July of oh-11? A number of critics are already saying it's a signal to the Taliban the U.S. will start a drawdown.

What criteria will you be regularly measuring U.S. progress against, and which to determine whether a drawdown can begin?

LT. CRAGG: (Off mike) -- Sedney.

MR. SEDNEY: On that, the criteria here is the ability of the Afghans to take lead security responsibility.

We have been building, are building, and will build even more intensively Afghan national security forces -- the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police -- that will fulfill the goal that President Karzai set out in his inauguration speech and which has been at the center of our efforts, as the -- from (when ?) the president's laid out the strategy back in March of building Afghan security forces.

So that's the criteria that we'll be looking for, and it'll be a district-by-district, province-by-province process. There'll be different levels of presence that'll be needed, different levels of capability that'll be needed, and (they'll ?) be facing different levels of threat.

But I have to say that -- and General Nicholson will be able to do this much more than I have, because he's been there more recently -- the

Afghan Army, the Afghan Police, there are a lot of brave and courageous people. There are some really effective units there.

This is not something that we're starting from ground zero; this is something that we're building on. And I think that the goal of doing -- of this transitioning the lead security responsibility by the summer of 2011 is one that is very realistic, not at all arbitrary.

Q General?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Yes. Yeah, what I would add to what David just shared with you is that we view -- there is a decision point in the summer of 2011. It was -- I've heard it characterized by some of -- (word inaudible) -- leadership as a transition point where we envision that we are transitioning security responsibilities in some selected areas in Afghanistan to an Afghan lead, which is what the Afghans want.

And to reinforce what David said, in my experience working with Afghanistan -- the Afghan Army, in particular, over the last four years, there are certain units in certain places where they are capable of doing this.

They clearly need our help as a -- I'd characterize that help as a bridging force to get us through these -- through the necessary combat operations to secure the population in some key areas. But we are also, with these additional forces, going to act as a critical catalyst to accelerate their development.

And those who may have experience with the Afghan military will know they do improve. I'd say that the curve is more of an exponential curve when they're working closely -- and partnered properly and closely, particularly with our forces. Just from my own experience, you do see a definite difference in their progress when closely partnered.

So as you all know, a close partnership is a critical component of General McChrystal's plans as we go forward.

Q Okay. Thanks a lot.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Sure.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Tony.

Leo, please go ahead.

Q Yeah, hi. Leo Shane, from Stars and Stripes.

I have a question about the 30,000 guys that are going to get over there so quickly. How -- what's going to be done to facilitate that? What's the -- (inaudible) -- you're going to be able to get all the equipment and all the folks there in the next six, seven months?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Well, as you know, that is very challenging. And in southern Afghanistan last year we introduced close to 20,000 troops in

about the same amount of time. It was very challenging, but it can be done.

The issue -- really, the issues are logistics, building the infrastructure, getting the equipment in there. I mean, there's many, many variables to the equation. And we'll be doing our absolute best to accelerate that as quickly as possible.

I'd also mention, as the president mentioned tonight, as you've heard many of our allies, both NATO and other ISAF troop-contributing nations are also going to be providing additional forces. And we expect --

Although many of those announcements have not gone public yet, with the upcoming force generation conference on the 7th of December and then later on at the London conference, we expect to hear more public confirmation of some of those contributions.

So those contributions are also going to be a part of the force buildup. And I think, when you couple these things together with our desire to expedite everything in there, and the allies', you'll see this kind of rapid force buildup that has been referred to.

LT. CRAGG: Thanks, Leo.

Let's go to Maggie. Maggie, you're next.

Q Hi, General. Do you see the NATO contribution making up in any part for the at least 10,000 troops that we didn't get tonight?

GEN. NICHOLSON: We're estimating between five (thousand) to 7,000, in terms of contributions from NATO and other ISAF troop-contributing nations. So most definitely, that will help with the effort.

MR. SEDNEY: And I want to stress that this is not a situation where we didn't get any number of troops.

What we're sending to Afghanistan by next summer, by the end of next summer, will be more troops, more quickly, than any proposal that has been before the president. And this came out of that process that General Nicholson mentioned that was deliberative, that looked at what was needed.

And to sort of refer back to the earlier question about the speed with which we're doing it, yes, that's going to be a challenge for us. It's going to be a real challenge for our people who do logistics. The point here is to reverse the momentum.

So what we're doing here is we're going to be putting into the hands of General McChrystal more troops, sooner, in order to have the impact on the momentum of the Taliban -- to not just blunt that momentum, but to reverse that and, at the same time, do that partnering with the Afghan forces that starts to allow us to transition more to them.

The troops that the allies will be putting in and the fact that NATO has looked at the requests from -- (inaudible) -- is asking for and is getting very positive response on additional troops is very heartening.

So what we will have is we'll have the troops that are necessary in order to achieve the goals that we've set, but are somewhat refined. They're more focused than the goals that we've -- (inaudible) -- this with, starting back in March, as a result of this examination, as a result of a look at the change in circumstances.

So we have a situation here where, as a result of the process the president's led, we have more -- a refined focus on what we're doing and we also have a greater focus on speed and getting people in there.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Maggie.

Let's go to Andrew. You're next.

Q General, Andrew Lubin from Leatherneck Magazine.

Sir, I've just come back from six weeks in Afghanistan, where I spent about half of it in RC South, the other half in RC East.

In RC East, I ran into unit after unit that doesn't patrol on foot. They're doing (presence ?) patrols in MRAPs and vehicles.

How does sending any amount of troops make a difference if people won't get out of their vehicles and meet the villagers?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Andrew, first off, thanks for getting over there and getting a firsthand look at things.

And I think you're correct. In order to connect with the people, you've got to get out and literally connect with the people.

And I think the challenge for military leaders, as you personally witnessed, is you're making those hard choices on what level of risk am I willing to assume for my troops in order to connect with the people? And so -- whether that's in how you respond when you get into a kinetic engagement or what kind of force posture you maintain on your routine patrolling.

And so those are decisions that leaders at the junior level make every single day. And I'm sure, in your time over there, you're familiar with the guidance that General McChrystal's put out to troops to really foster that connection.

I know that the Marines in central Helmand are doing a great job of getting out on foot and patrolling. I also know from my own personal experience in the east, during our time there we did a lot of that patrolling on foot because that is the most successful way to connect with the people.

So I think, on the other hand, as you know, the IED threat has increased in Afghanistan across the board -- I want to say about 75 percent -- in the past year. And particularly in the south we have seen a significant increase in IEDs, not necessarily -- in the size and even when in an MRAP, sometimes the force of these IEDs can be effective against them as well.

So it's a constant trade-off that leaders on the ground have got to make.

Q Okay, great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Andrew.

Let's go to Mark. You're next.

Q Sorry -- I was muted.

My name's Mark Danziger (sp), and I'll ask a question that's informed a little bit by the fact that I'm the parent of a paratrooper in the 4th 82nd who's part of the group that went over earlier this year.

And I watched with a lot of interest his training, as he went over. And what I noticed was that, honestly, he and his team didn't get a whole lot of (ETT ?) training. And as somebody who's academically studied counterinsurgency a bit, I sort of watch with interest that we're going to be expediting troops who, as you said, are going to be going over faster than General McChrystal had anticipated.

And while the logistics of that are stunning, my ears go up at the question of are these troops ready for anything, kind of, except kinetic-type actions?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Yeah, that's a great question. And you, because of being a concerned parent, I want to say, first off, thank you for your support and for your family's service in this war. And there are many, many families who have multiple relatives out there in the fight, and again, I just want to say thanks.

I worked with the 4th of the 82nd in southern Afghanistan just a few short months ago, as they were coming in -- working with Brian Drinkwine, the brigade commander. I know he and his leaders were over to Afghanistan multiple times, really looking closely at how to organize, prepare and train for this mission.

And one of the challenges is they are the first unit into Afghanistan in this role. This is the first time we've used a BCT in a training role in the fashion that the 4th of the 82nd is being used.

On their previous rotation to Afghanistan, as you're well aware, they were (going ?) in a counterinsurgency role in the east. So I know the leaders took this transition quite seriously.

One of the things I'll comment on is they did look to maintain unit integrity to the maximum extent possible, down at the platoon level and even company level in the assignment of sectors.

So what I'd say to you is that they -- knowing that there is a set of uncertain circumstances, not certain of the final areas in which they'd be deployed, they focused on developing well-trained teams, and cohesive teams, who could then deal with the set of conditions that they would inherit once they got there, in this new training role.

And so that, I know, was one of Brian's focuses as he went into it. And the other piece to this, of course, is that the 4th 82nd is working in a different and more close command relationship with the actual operational command headquarters on the ground, RC South, as opposed to previous training units that worked for CSTCA. So there's a number of new things that the unit is doing down there.

I would also suggest that the basic skills in terms of, you know, those that a rifle platoon or company need in a counterinsurgency environment are the same kinds of skills that they're trying to impart to the unit that they're working with.

And so the investment in those skills not only enhances the survivability and an effectiveness of the unit on its own but also the degree to which they can impart that to the unit that they're training and working with.

And the police down there and the 4/82nd is doing a lot of work with the police. I'm not sure if your son is in one of those.

Q Yes, he is.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Okay. The police down there end up fighting as light infantry, quite frankly. And this is because we have a shortage of ANA in the south. This is why we're trying to accelerate their growth. So light infantry skills being taught to the police, even though it may sound counterintuitive, is actually what we're doing at this stage to enable them to do their jobs, because until we get the army built up to sufficient levels, the police end up fighting as light infantry quite often. So I hope that answers your question.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Mark.

Let's go to Beth. You're next.

Q Thank you. This is Beth Wilson with Homefront in Focus.

Gentlemen, thank you so much for your time tonight. The president mentioned that budget was a concern of his, and that he would be watching the cost of this war and how to pay for it. My question is, with the cover of the Navy Times talking about sailors paying for their own equipment, what are your concerns with the new look, the costs of the war and perhaps going in under an austerity program? Are you getting what

you need to fight this war effectively? Are you concerned about budget constraints impacting our ability?

MR. SEDNEY: Beth, thanks for your question, and also thanks for your work. I'm reading your bio. I was really impressed by the work that you've done to help families.

Q Thank you.

MR. SEDNEY: On the budget issue, the president did express concern about the budgetary impact and the costs of all of our wars and tied that into our overall economy. But at the same time, I can assure you the president is fully committed to ensuring that the troops that we send are completely equipped, that they have all the support that they need. This is not going to be an austerity fight here.

There is going to be an effort to ensure that our national priorities are right, that our priorities -- and the president used that famous quote from President Eisenhower, are all the policies of the nation been balanced, that the domestic, international, military, civilian priorities have to be balanced.

But when it comes to supporting to the military and then to supporting the family, the president has made it very, very clear that that is a number one priority. He knows, he has looked at and he has reached out to the families themselves, and he is committed there.

General Nicholson, do you want to add anything?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Yeah. No, I'm not familiar with the specific instance about sailors buying their own equipment. I do know that we have the soldiers who go outside the wire and operate in these areas, I mean, we look very closely at the equipment they have. I mean, there is individual equipment, there's unit equipment. I know when we introduce new forces, like we're doing now, one of our principal concerns is bringing in the vehicles and other specialized equipment that they do require since they're not replacing forces already in the theater, they're being newly introduced.

So one of our, you know, major logistical challenges is getting that equipment into the country. And it is a major focus of what we are doing right now.

To the extent we can leverage equipment that's being retrograded out of Iraq, we're going to do that to make that a little easier. But a significant amount of this equipment will need to be brought in from elsewhere.

So with the president's decision and with the orders being issued, we're going to be able to start that process.

Q Thank you so much.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Beth.

Let's go to Fred. Fred, you're next.

Q Hi. Fred Kaplan with Slate magazine.

I have a question about the NATO troops that are going to be increased. Is there any talk of some of these countries, some of these governments reducing their caveats? I know there are so many of these countries that, you know, put so many constraints on what they will do. In some cases, even adding 20,000 more troops really wouldn't accomplish much.

GEN. NICHOLSON: It's Nicholson here. That's a great question. I'm glad you asked it, because we do hear a lot of talk about the caveats.

I want to highlight from my recent experience in RC South. We have 17 nations in the southern region of Afghanistan. Six of those nations are providing a battalion or more of soldiers. I mean, these are countries like Romania, Denmark, the Estonians provide a company, the Australians, in addition to, of course, the better-known ones in the southern region, the British, the Canadians, the Dutch.

I mean, these soldiers fight, and these nations have done a lot of heavy lifting for the Alliance down there. And so while certainly caveats are a concern, rightfully so, there's a lot of our allies who are operating some very tough areas and taking some very high casualties -- the Brits, the Danes.

When you look at percentage-wise losses from nations like the Danes, fighting in Helmand province, you know, probably, definitely the toughest province in Afghanistan -- so the percentage losses they're taking are amongst the highest in the Alliance.

So yes, there are certainly -- you know, we get concerned about any restrictions which would impede operations. But from a personal experience and working with the allies there, that hasn't been an issue, especially in the areas where American forces are operating.

And many of these discussions on contributions, of course, or consultations going on government-to-government have not been announced yet. But we're seeing some (progress ?).

Q What are the ground rules of this, by the way?

MR. SEDNEY: One more point on that, which is that in our discussion with our allies over the last several months, what we've found is greater and greater willingness to come forward with fewer and fewer caveats. So as General Nicholson said, it was a good question. It is an issue, but both on the ground and in the NATO capitals it's become less and less of one.

And I would add also to what General Nicholson said, our allies, and particularly our allies in Canada, who have suffered on a

proportional basis greater casualties than we have in terms of their number, their population, these people, these brave soldiers, these brave men and women from these other countries are doing just a tremendous work there, and we appreciate it.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you. We have at least six more bloggers to get to. So thank you very much, Fred.

Richard said to skip him, so I'm going to skip him, as requested.

Let's go ahead to Nicholas, you're next.

Q Thanks. This is Nicholas Boudreau (sp) with -- (inaudible).

I want to follow up on the first question, sort of, about the 2011 -- (inaudible). What's the expected end game? Are we trying to get Afghan security forces to control 100 percent of the territory? Is it 80 percent? Does it vary by province? Is there a range that -- (inaudible) -- acceptable? Can you talk more about that, please? Thanks.

MR. SEDNEY: Well, the ultimate goal is definitely to have Afghanistan be a sovereign country that is in charge of its own security. That definitely is the goal. The summer of 2011, I would say, is an inflection point. That's when, based on the conditions today, based upon the inputs that we're putting in, over the coming months, when we have a very good expectation that the Afghans will be ready to start assuming this lead security responsibility and allow troops to start coming home the way the president said.

But that's going to be conditions-based. It's going to be based upon the conditions in each district, in each province, as we were saying before.

It's going to be something that we're going to be doing with the Afghans. It's not something that we're going to be deciding on our own, although we're going to be doing everything to help. And I want to stress that this is very much something that the Afghans themselves want.

I've talked to the Afghan Defense minister. I know General Nicholson has talked to him and to others up and down the line, Afghans from the youngest, greenest soldier to the older, grizzled veterans. They want to be in charge of their own country. They want to be responsible for their own security. They often tell us that they're embarrassed that we're there fighting for them.

But their nation, as the president pointed out in his speech today, has been impoverished, has been ravaged by years of war and oppression. And that's why they need our help at this time when they're threatened by al Qaeda and Taliban.

General.

GEN. NICHOLSON: I mean, I think David said it very well. And I want to reiterate, again on a personal level, my experience with the

Afghan leadership. I mean, we do hear a lot. For example, corruption is an issue in the Afghan government, certainly. However, there are many Afghans who I've found, who have risen above self-interest. If I didn't believe that there was a sufficient number of them who could rise above self-interest and are interested in establishing this modern Islamic republic that can secure itself, then I wouldn't morally be able to support this in the way that I do.

But I feel quite strongly that this is very possible, and it's because of my positive experience with many Afghan leaders that David just talked about.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Nicholas.

Q Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Let's go to Noah, you're next.

Q Hey, it's Noah Shachtman with Wired.

General, I want to send this question over to you. I heard the president talk tonight, and been on this conference call, and I still don't really have a clear idea of what these 30,000 new troops are supposed to be doing. So could you break down for me what each unit is going to be doing, whether that's, you know, more kinetics, protecting the population, you know, what have you?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Sure. I can break it down to a certain extent. General McChrystal and his team, of course, are working through the details of that. And I wouldn't want to, you know, steal his thunder. He'll be talking in more detail about that, I think within the hour, in fact over in Afghanistan.

But you're going to have the majority of these forces are in what he would call a bridging role. And then all of them are what we would call or performing sort of a catalyst role.

Let me be a little more specific. So the initial forces going in will include an additional Marine regimental combat team going to southern Afghanistan to be a part of the Marine expeditionary brigade (in ?) Afghanistan. And they will assist in securing the population in central Helmand.

We'll see additional combat forces going to southern Afghanistan to assist in the securing of the population in Kandahar.

We'll see additional, again, brigade combat team doing counterinsurgency operations in the east, additional trainers coming in, additional enablers across the board.

The additional trainers will enable greater capacity in the training base to training more Afghans to achieve this acceleration in the growth of the Afghan army that we're looking for.

The additional forces are going to also be involved in very close partnering with Afghan units. So the close partnering relationship I referenced a little bit before. But we have found that they become then a catalyst for the accelerated development of the capability of the Afghan forces.

We bring enabling capabilities as we help them develop things like artillery, intelligence capabilities, engineer capabilities, route clearance capabilities. They tend to fight well as infantry, and we can produce infantry units fairly quickly. But these enabling capabilities and the leadership, in general, are two of the areas where we act as a catalyst to help in that development.

So the additional forces then, the combination of all this reverses the momentum. And you'll hear General McChrystal talk about this. He already has. It's in his assessment.

It's important now that we get an initial infusion of forces to help reverse this momentum quickly and buy space and time for the growth of the Afghan forces. And so that's the principal goal of these forces coming in. That's why we want to introduce them and will introduce them as quickly as possible.

And this is that bridging role that I had talked about up front, to help fight alongside the Afghans, buy them space and time for them to develop capacity and take over the fight.

Q So it's a quick counterpunch?

GEN. NICHOLSON: I think that's a way to look at it. We're going to buy space and time, space meaning by physically securing the population. And then quickly as we can produce capable Afghan security units of the army and police, that they come in and take over those primary security roles from us.

We are closely partnered with them throughout. And then over time, we shift into more of an advise and an assist role.

MR. SEDNEY: I like your vision of the quick counterpunch, although I'd say it's probably a little bit more than that. In the past for Afghanistan, we've been reactive and slow to react and reacted with too little. The objective here is to get ahead, to jump ahead of the demands and to reverse the momentum by doing that.

But that's a good term or phrase. We'll have to start using it.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, gentlemen.

We are approaching the end of the Blogger Roundtable, and I know Bob, Troy, Greg, Mike, Bruce and Taylor, I sent you all an e-mail asking if you wanted to forward your questions, and I will make sure they are forwarded to Mary Ann, and we'll go from there. I apologize.

I will send everybody an official transcript from tonight's call. But I want to turn it back over to Mr. Sedney, if you'd like to end with any closing thoughts.

MR. SEDNEY: Well, I just want to thank everybody for taking the time to be with us here. This is going to be a tough road ahead. But with the commitment, with the resolve that the president put forward in his speech, with the dedication and the bravery of the men and women, the soldiers, the Marines, the sailors who are going to be going to Afghanistan to carry this forward, I personally -- and I want to second General Nicholson here. Based upon what I've seen from the Afghans and based really especially on what I've seen from the American military and our allies who are there, I have a very high degree of confidence that we're finally on the right course in Afghanistan, that we are going to be able to succeed.

And succeeding in Afghanistan, as the president said, is not staying in Afghanistan. Succeeding in Afghanistan is turning Afghanistan over to the Afghans to take care of the country themselves, which is exactly what they want to do.

GEN. NICHOLSON: And let me just add to that my thanks, for one, not just your interest and support for this, but the important role you're playing in informing, you know, our American citizenry about what we are -- (inaudible) -- Afghanistan.

And as someone who's served over there over the past few years, it's been extremely encouraging to know of the tremendous outpouring of support that comes from the American people for all of our soldiers, Marines and airmen and sailors.

But oftentimes, I've found that people do not understand how we are doing what we're doing, what it is we're seeking to accomplish. The president's speech tonight, you know, laid that out in great fashion. And what you're doing with your follow up and explanations, I think, is a critical part of this dialogue that's got to occur.

So I just want to reiterate what Jennifer said. Please, forward your questions. We'll be happy to take them and give you an answer. I'm sorry we weren't able to get to all of you tonight. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, gentlemen.

Thank you to all the bloggers. And just so everybody knows, you can find the transcript and the audio file on [www.dodlive.mil](http://www.dodlive.mil). You've been listening to Mr. David Sedney and Brigadier General John Nicholson.

This concludes this (evening's ?) event.