

NATO Aims at Afghans Whose Drugs Aid Militants

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WASHINGTON — NATO forces in Afghanistan will step up attacks on drug lords and narcotics traffickers who are supporting an insurgency that has rebounded in the past year and is responsible for rising violence, the top American commander in Afghanistan said Wednesday.

The comments by the commander, Gen. David D. McKiernan, made clear that international troops in Afghanistan were not going to eradicate opium poppy crops. Afghanistan is the world's top supplier of opium poppies, which are processed into heroin.

But by drawing a clear link between the narcotics trade and its role in the insurgency, General McKiernan was outlining what could be an important and expanding role for American and NATO troops as they seek to eliminate a source of money and weapons for the insurgency.

"I think there's a need for increased involvement in I.S.A.F. in assisting the Afghan government in counternarcotics efforts," said General McKiernan, commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force, or I.S.A.F. "Where we can make a clear intelligence linkage between a narcotics dealer or a facility and the insurgency, I consider that a force protection issue, and we can deal with that in a military way."

NATO commanders always have the right to take steps to protect their troops. It is under this authority that General McKiernan is authorizing attacks on drug lords who are helping the insurgency.

Specifically, General McKiernan said his forces would be authorized to attack narcotics bosses, their foot soldiers and infrastructure if they were linked to the movement of weapons, improvised explosives or foreign fighters into Afghanistan.

Some nongovernmental organizations have urged international security forces to take an active role in eradicating the poppy crops. But American and NATO officials have vigorously rejected those proposals, saying such decisions should be left to the Afghan government, which would also have to develop alternate livelihoods for the farmers.

Even so, General McKiernan noted that NATO's senior commander, Gen. John Craddock, had approached the alliance to see whether the mandate for Afghanistan should be reopened to determine "if there are some increased authorities that NATO should exercise" in combatting narcotics.

"We should expand our support to that," General McKiernan said at one of two news conferences he held here on Wednesday.

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He said today's fight in Afghanistan was against more than just the Taliban and Al Qaeda, but also "a very broad range of militant groups that are combined with the criminality, with the narco-trafficking system, with corruption, that form a threat and a challenge to the future of that great country."

The general said the Taliban would take in at least \$100 million in heroin proceeds this year.

In recent weeks, General McKiernan has officially requested three additional brigade combat teams for the mission, an increase of more than 15,000 over the 8,500 new soldiers already approved by President Bush. He said more helicopters were also needed.

As military commanders and political leaders review the strategy for Afghanistan, General McKiernan expressed doubts that a successful effort in Iraq that enlisted tribal forces to the coalition side could be repeated in Afghanistan.

Especially in Anbar Province, a western region of Iraq that was a base of the Sunni-led insurgency, American military officers were able to persuade tribal leaders to support the coalition fight against insurgents.

"The difference in Afghanistan is that there needs to be an Afghan-led effort to engage the tribes," General McKiernan said.

In Afghanistan, there "is a degree of complexity in the tribal system which is much greater than what I found in Iraq years ago," he added. "And I also find that of the over 400 major tribal networks inside of Afghanistan, they have been largely, as I said earlier, traumatized by over 30 years of war, so a lot of that traditional tribal structure has broken down."

General McKiernan, who has been critical of Pakistan's efforts to stem the flow of foreign fighters using havens there to attack allied forces in Afghanistan, said he was "cautiously optimistic" that a continuing assault by Pakistani forces against militants in the tribal area of Bajaur could put a dent in extremist operations in the border region.

"I am encouraged by the military operations that the Pakistani Army and Frontier Corps have undertaken," General McKiernan said.

General McKiernan also praised the appointment this week of a new head of Pakistan's top spy organization, saying the new director general, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, was likely to reform the agency, which the general said had had "institutional and historical" ties to the Taliban and other militant networks.

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