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## 3,000 Marines could be headed to Afghanistan

By William H. McMichael - Staff writer

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The Pentagon has received a U.S. Central Command request to send roughly 3,000 Marines to Afghanistan to bolster the combat troop-strapped NATO force and counter a possible spring offensive by Taliban insurgents.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, who has expressed concern that six years of progress in Afghanistan could be reversed if NATO efforts falter, is expected to begin considering the request beginning Friday. He is not, however, expected to make a snap decision, according to press secretary Geoff Morrell.

"It is highly unlikely that he will approve this on the spot," Morrell said Wednesday evening. "He has more thinking to do on this matter. It's a serious commitment of additional troops. And he wants to discuss it with some additional people."

The NATO International Security Assistance Force, now roughly 41,700 troops — 14,000 of them U.S. — bolsters efforts by the Afghan army and police forces to provide security and stability in war-torn country so its young government can rebuild and become more economically secure. A parallel effort by the U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force 82 — 12,000 U.S. and 1,200 other coalition troops — focuses on defeating anti-government extremists.

If Gates decides to approve the new request, the troops — a Marine Air-Ground Task Force and a battalion that would focus on the training of Afghan army and police units — would be in place by April and spend seven months operating in southern Afghanistan, the area most vexed by Taliban attacks. It would be a "one-time-only" deployment and the troops, who would be assigned to Regional Command South, would not be replaced by additional U.S. forces, Morrell said.

RC South, headquartered in Kandahar, is currently commanded by the United Kingdom.

Sources said the Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit — scheduled to deploy in mid-February — went into high gear this week, laying plans for an accelerated deployment schedule that could have the unit departing for Afghanistan on Feb. 1 and staying out past its traditional 180-day rotation. However, unit officials would not confirm that the group is planning to leave early.

"We do not have a deployment order," or a warning order, said Capt. Kelly Frushour, spokeswoman for the Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based unit.

The 24th MEU is planning to deploy with the Nassau Expeditionary Strike Group. Cmdr. Herman Phillips, 2nd Fleet public affairs officer, said he knew of no changes to the Nassau ESG deployment schedule.

"There's nothing planned right now," he said.

Morrell said no units have been identified, but that they would not be drawn from neighboring Iraq. Late last year, Gates rejected a Marine Corps proposal to move Marine units from Iraq's Anbar province to Afghanistan. The security situation in Anbar, while much improved over the past year, "remains tenuous," Morrell said.

Gates has repeatedly complained that other NATO countries have not contributed enough combat forces and other capabilities, particularly helicopters capable of high-altitude operations, to the coalition effort. Gates has said ISAF is short about 3,500 trainers and to meet every command requirement, a total of 7,500 additional troops would be needed.

But Gates softened his tone during his December meetings with NATO defense ministers in Scotland, saying the U.S., recognizing "political realities" faced by some European governments regarding involvement in Afghanistan, would stop

"hammering" its allies to contribute more and instead take a more creative approach toward resolving the shortfalls — such getting allies to contribute more funds for items such as helicopter overhaul.

"As a result, we will likely have to bear more of the combat shortfall," Morrell said.

Violence increased markedly over the past 18 months in Afghanistan, particularly in the south — the result, U.S. officials say, of renewed Taliban assaults. But the new proposal is not a reaction to that increase but rather, Morrell said, "more a move in anticipation of what we expect to be another attempt at a Taliban spring offensive." The idea is to get the Marines in place "to prevent, as we did last spring, another attempt by the Taliban to come back."

The Taliban controlled Afghanistan from 1996 until late-2001, when a coalition of U.S. and Afghan warlord-led forces drove them from power. Pockets of Taliban insurgents have remained in Afghanistan ever since, some crossing into eastern Afghanistan from tribal areas in neighboring Pakistan to spring attacks on civilians and coalition forces.

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Staff writers Andrew Scutro and Trista Talton contributed to this report.

