

U.S. Struggles to Bolster Afghan Forces

By YOCHI J. DREAZEN
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WASHINGTON -- The Pentagon has concluded it can't send additional troops to Afghanistan until sizable numbers of forces withdraw from Iraq, a senior military official said Monday.

U.S. commanders in Afghanistan believe they need an additional three brigades of American forces, between 10,000 and 12,000 troops, to combat the Taliban and to speed the training of Afghanistan's security forces.

OVER THERE

- **The News:** The Pentagon has concluded it can't send additional troops to Afghanistan until sizable numbers of forces withdraw from Iraq.
- **The Need:** U.S. commanders in Afghanistan believe they need an additional 10,000 to 12,000 troops to fight the Taliban.

The requests will go unmet until U.S. troop levels in Iraq start coming down. The military "can't move a substantial amount of additional forces into Afghanistan unless there are additional forces which come

out of Iraq," the official said. "We might be able to generate a little bit more, but not 10,000 to 12,000 more troops."

The comments were an acknowledgment of the challenges facing the Pentagon as it scrambles to find enough troops for counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

U.S. troop levels in both Iraq and Afghanistan are already at or near their highest levels since the start of the two wars. The administration's decision to freeze troop levels in Iraq after the last of the 30,000 "surge" troops depart this summer has left Pentagon officials with few options for finding more forces for Afghanistan.

The U.S. has been pressing its allies to contribute more troops to the fight in Afghanistan, but the requests have largely fallen on deaf ears. The only country with firm plans to deploy fresh forces is France, which is preparing to send 700 troops.

NATO commands a force of about 44,000 in Afghanistan, including 16,000 U.S. troops and about 28,000 troops from Canada, Britain and other countries. The U.S. has 18,000 other troops in the country under separate American command. The overall U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan is 34,000, up from 25,000 three years ago.

In January, the White House announced plans to send 3,200 additional Marines to the country, and U.S. officials now say they hope to send as many as 12,000 more troops to Afghanistan this year and next.

Afghanistan has re-emerged as a priority for U.S. policy makers in recent months. U.S. military and intelligence officials believe senior al-Qaeda figures, including Osama bin Laden, operate out of the mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Violence in Afghanistan has been rising; last year was the deadliest year for American forces since the start of the war in 2001. U.S. officials said Iran bears some responsibility for the bloodshed. The senior military official said Iran is training the Taliban. He also said Iran is providing weapons support to the Taliban, most notably the technology to build roadside bombs capable of punching through even the strongest U.S. armor.

The official said the emerging relationship surprised the U.S. because Iran's Shiite government and the Sunni Taliban were "enemies until not too long ago." But the two groups have set aside that past animosity.

Write to Yochi J. Dreazen at yochi.dreazen@wsj.com



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