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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, June 22, 2011 5:48 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Obama to unveil plan for Afghanistan troop withdrawal (Reuters)

From: OpsNewsTicker
Sent: Wednesday, June 22, 2011 05:39 PM
To: NEWS-Mahogany; NEWS-Pakistan; NEWS-Afghanistan
Cc: SES-O
Subject: Obama to unveil plan for Afghanistan troop withdrawal (Reuters)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Barack Obama was set to unveil Wednesday his plan to start bringing U.S. troops home from Afghanistan, a decisive first step toward ending a decade-long war that is increasingly unpopular in the United States.

Obama will announce in a televised address at 8 p.m. EDT a plan to pull out 10,000 troops from Afghanistan by year's end, followed by 23,000 more by the end of next summer, a congressional aide told Reuters.

The announcement caps weeks of speculation about the future of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, nearly 10 years after the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States that triggered the war in which U.S. and other Western forces have been unable to deal a decisive blow to the insurgent Taliban.

Obama received recommendations last week from General David Petraeus, the outgoing commander of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, with several options for drawing down some of the 100,000 U.S. soldiers there starting in July.

The president faces a host of contradictory pressures as he seeks to rein in government spending on the war and halt American casualties without endangering the gains his military commanders say they have made across southern Afghanistan.

"There's almost no decision Obama can make that's a good one. We are in an economic crisis and this an expensive war," said Robert Lamb, a conflict expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "On the other hand, we can't leave an Afghanistan that is unstable -- it's not in our interest to be seen as cutting and running."

The decision to withdraw 33,000 troops -- all the additional troops Obama sent to Afghanistan in 2010 in a "surge" of U.S. forces -- by the end of the summer in 2012 is unlikely to sit well with the Pentagon's top brass.

Outgoing Defense Secretary Robert Gates has warned against a precipitous departure. Removing too many troops before the United States can prove it has turned a corner, Gates said, would be "premature."

But some in Congress, impatient with a war that now costs more than \$110 billion a year, have demanded a larger initial drawdown.

SHIFT SINCE BIN LADEN'S DEATH

The debate in Washington has shifted palpably since U.S. special forces killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan last month.

His death has given critics from both parties ammunition to argue that the Obama administration must narrow more sharply U.S. goals in Afghanistan, which remains desperately poor and notoriously corrupt.

While the United States has embraced efforts to find a political settlement with the Taliban, officials acknowledge a peace deal may be far in the future even if one could be had.

Obama is mindful of the American public's lack of support for the war as he looks to his 2012 re-election campaign.

A Pew Research poll released Tuesday found a record 56 percent of Americans favor bringing U.S. forces in Afghanistan home as quickly as possible.

Still, the situation on the ground in Afghanistan is volatile and Obama will face heat from Republicans if he is seen as rushing toward the exit.

The Taliban has been pushed out of some areas of their southern heartland, but the insurgency has intensified along Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan and U.S. commanders are expected to shift their focus to that area.

"We've got an awful lot invested here," said U.S. House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner, a Republican. "If the president listens to our commanders on the ground and our diplomats in the region, and makes a decision, I'll be there to support him," he told reporters.

July will see the official start of NATO's handover to local security forces in keeping with a plan to put Afghan soldiers in charge across the country by the end of 2014.

Serious doubts remain about whether Afghan forces, plagued by desertion and illiteracy, will be up to the task.

Vali Nasr, who until April was a senior State Department adviser on the region, said a decision to shrink the U.S. military footprint without fully taking into account the many challenges that remain in Afghanistan would be reckless.

"Without a real turning point in the war, without a peace treaty or a clear defeat of the Taliban, we are going to pull out these troops unilaterally," he said. "It's going to be a very consequential decision in what we're trying to achieve over there."

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