

Second Elite U.S. Brigade to Join Canadians in Kandahar

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The U.S. army is to send an elite combat brigade from the 101st Airborne to assist Canadian Forces to create a security noose around Kandahar City, a further indication that NATO war planners believe that the war against the Taliban may be won or lost in coming year in the southern province.

The move, which Canadians commanders in Kandahar have been quietly waiting for since last month, was discussed by Lt.-Gen. David Rodriguez in an interview published Thursday in the Wall Street Journal.

About 4,000 paratroopers from the Fort Campbell, Ky.-based division are to arrive in Kandahar between March and May of next year, said Lt.-Gen. Rodriguez who, as No. 2 to U.S. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, has operational command of more than 100,000 NATO forces already in Afghanistan or preparing to the head there.

The plan, which Canadians have acknowledged in recent weeks without providing precise details about the total force, is to flood areas close to Afghanistan's second largest city with Canadian and U.S. troops.

Kandahar's provincial capital is regarded by the Taliban as its spiritual home and is the prize most coveted by them.

The 4,000 soldiers are part of a surge of 30,000 fresh U.S. troops headed for Afghanistan that was recently announced by U.S. President Barack Obama.

The new troops for Kandahar are in addition to a parachute battalion from the 82nd Airborne, which is being deployed from elsewhere in Afghanistan. This battalion, which is to be in place by next week, will be under Canadian command, along with a military police unit from the 82nd Airborne and the 1st battalion of the U.S. army's 12th Infantry Regiment.

Troops from those three American units report to Brig.-Gen. Daniel Menard, commander of Canada's Task Force Afghanistan, who with about 5,800 troops in his brigade retains operational control of much of the vital ground near Kandahar City.

The new brigade coming from the 101st is expected to operate under U.S. command, as do three battalions from the U.S. army's 5th Stryker Brigade, which arrived in Kandahar last summer.

Retired colonel Alain Pellerin, executive director of the Canadian Conference of Defence

Associations, said the increased troop strength in and around Kandahar “reinforces the importance” the NATO commander and his predecessor place on securing the city and the province.

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Gen. McChrystal told reporters Wednesday that “we are going to provide significant forces” to secure Kandahar and region.

The military buildup by NATO in Kandahar has been significant.

As recently as 18 months ago, there was only a lonely force of 1,250 Canadian combat troops fighting the Taliban across an area the size of New Brunswick.

With the latest additions, NATO will have about 9,000 American troops fighting in Kandahar alongside the Alberta-based Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry battle group within six months. Most of the troops will be located within an hour’s drive of the capital because that is where about 80 per cent of the province’s population lives.

American commanders, including Gen. McChrystal, have lauded the Canadians for keeping the Taliban off-balance in Kandahar for several years. But it has been widely acknowledged that the best that Canada could achieve with such meagre numbers was to put out fires created by the Taliban wherever they occurred.

As more U.S. forces began to flow into Kandahar this year, Canada has greatly narrowed its focus to districts such as Panjwaii and Dand, where its troops have established security cordons that have become a template that NATO is now using all over Afghanistan....

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