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## **Building Up Afghan Capacity Seen as Key Challenge**

By REUTERS (Editing by Mohammad Zargham)

QUANTICO, Virginia (Reuters) - When U.S. forces went in to clear the Taliban stronghold of Marjah in February, the hope was that local Afghan government could step in fast, but that has proved tough and underscores a countrywide challenge.

At a conference at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia, U.S. and Afghan officials listed dozens of obstacles in building up "Afghan capacity" and boosting credibility of a government seen by many as inefficient and corrupt.

The Afghan government's past inability to deliver services and provide basic security in areas where the Taliban has been pushed out is seen as an important threat to the Obama administration's counterinsurgency strategy.

In many districts, more than half of government jobs were still vacant as officials faced constant security threats and more educated candidates chose safer, more lucrative private sector work, said Jilani Popal, head of the Afghan agency seeking to boost government effectiveness.

"There is an urgent need for an improvement of the human resource situation in the provinces," Popal, director of the Independent Directorate of Local Government in Afghanistan, told Marines and officials at Wednesday's symposium.

In an extreme example, he said, only five out of 75 positions were filled in one district late last year, six provinces still did not have buildings for governors and others had no power.

In addition, Taliban have targeted local officials -- as they did on Tuesday when a deputy mayor in Kandahar was killed after gunmen burst into a mosque while he was praying.

"We have a lot of difficult days ahead of us, especially in terms of the issues of governance," said Brigadier General John Nicholson, head of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell at the Pentagon.

Another problem weighing on confidence in local government was the performance of the police force which U.S. and other allies are trying to boost in order to secure areas where the Taliban are being cleared out.

Nicholson said of an estimated 102,000 police in the country's force, only about 30 percent were trained.



"We have a fielded force out there carrying guns that are completely untrained -- the majority of them," he said. "We are just getting out of the starting gates. We are years behind."

### **AFGHAN ARMY**

Retired Colonel Jeff Haynes, who was deployed to Afghanistan in 2008 and is now doing research and analysis there, said the Afghan Army also needed to step up and be given a stronger leadership role.

He said there was often cronyism and it was hard to punish or reward people in that environment, adding that corrupt officers should be removed.

"These guys are smart, they are clever people, they can do more and they are playing us. We need to stand up to that," Haynes said.

The State Department's top civilian representative in southern Afghanistan, Frank Ruggiero, said the United States was working hard to create a "connection" between the people of Afghanistan and their government.

In the former Taliban stronghold of Marjah, the U.S. government prepared what it dubbed a "government in a box" to extend the reach of central government to the southern town.

However, that has been tough going, and Ruggiero said freedom of movement was difficult to establish in Marjah. The route into the area was still "relatively insecure" and government capacity was slowly being built up.

Asked what lessons had been learned from Marjah before an expected major push in neighbouring Kandahar province this summer, he said there was a need to better prioritize which officials were needed fast and to ensure they were trained in time. "If you are going to clear the area, you need to work out what the services are you need to provide soon thereafter clearing, so that those people are trained, hired and ready to go," Ruggiero said.

The blame for poor governance could also be shared among allies and donors who had not focussed enough on this during the eight-year war, several speakers at the conference said.

Grant Kippen, who chaired the electoral complaints commission for the flawed election in Afghanistan last year, said there had been a giant lack of voter education from the officials taking part to those who voted.

"I think a huge effort needs to go into educating public servants at all levels," he said.