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The Associated Press

Taliban defenses near Afghanistan town

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02/11/2010

NEAR MARJAH - U.S. Marines fired smoke rounds Wednesday and armored vehicles maneuvered close to Taliban positions to test insurgent defenses ahead of an anticipated attack on the biggest militant-controlled town in southern Afghanistan.

A NATO spokesman in Brussels called on Taliban militants holding Marjah to surrender. But a Taliban spokesman boasted that the militants are prepared to sacrifice their lives to defend the town against the biggest NATO-Afghan offensive of the eight-year war.

The date for the main attack by thousands of Marines and Afghan soldiers has not been announced for security reasons. However, preparations have accelerated in recent days, and it appears the assault will come soon.

U.S. mortar crews fired two dozen smoke rounds Wednesday at Taliban positions on the outskirts of the farming community, a center of the opium poppy trade about 380 miles southwest of Kabul in Helmand province. Marine armored vehicles also drove closer to Taliban positions. Both moves are designed to lure the militants into shooting back and revealing their positions. The Marines drew small arms fire but suffered no casualties.

"Deception is pretty important because it allows us to test the enemy's resistance," said Lt. Col. Brian Christmas, the commander of 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines Regiment. "There's a strategy to all this show of muscle."

The U.S. goal is to quickly retake control of Marjah to enable the Afghan government to re-establish a presence. Plans call for civilian workers to move quickly to restore electricity, clean

water and other public services in hopes of weaning the inhabitants away from the Taliban.

Civilians could be seen fleeing their mud brick farming compounds on the outskirts of Marjah as soon as the American and Afghan forces appeared, though vast numbers do not seem to be leaving. The moves did not draw much of a response from the fighters, who appeared to be waiting behind defensive lines for the Marines to come closer to the town.

To the north, a joint U.S.-Afghan force, led by the U.S. Army's 5th Stryker Brigade, pushed into the Badula Qulp region of Helmand province to restrict Taliban movement in support the Marjah offensive.

"It's a little slower than I had hoped," said Lt. Col. Burton Shields, commanding officer of the 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment.

Shields said the joint force was facing "harassing attacks" by groups of seven to nine insurgents.

"They're trying to buy time to move their leaders out of the area," he said.