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AFP

US winds down Afghan assault but bigger one on way

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US-led forces were winding down one of their biggest offensives in Afghanistan on Saturday, but an official said it was a prelude to a larger assault on the Taliban bastion of Kandahar.

The two-week Operation Mushtarak -- Dari for "Together" -- symbolically ended Thursday when authorities hoisted the Afghan flag in Marjah, a poppy-growing southern area that had eluded government control for years.

A US commander in Kandahar said most combat operations had "subsided", although US, British and Afghan troops would still need several weeks to exert control over more remote villages in the targeted area in Helmand province.

"There will be some sporadic fighting, I believe, some tough areas where there are still a few holdouts," Brigadier General Ben Hodges told the PBS Newshour on US public television.

"I think most of the significant combat operations though will have subsided. I think the majority of the enemy has either been killed or driven out or blended back into the population," he said.

Helmand government spokesman Daud Ahmadi said Marjah was returning to "normal" but authorities were reluctant to return thousands of displaced villagers to their homes because of the innumerable mines left by the Taliban.

"At the moment the situation is normal in Marjah," he told AFP.

But "the improvised bombs... are and have been a major problem. The troops are busy clearing the mines but the threat remains as big," he said.

"At the moment we do not have any particular programme to return the displaced people, mainly because of the mines," he said.

More than 4,000 families left Marjah to escape the violence, authorities and humanitarian organisations have said.

Ahmadi said shops were reopening and other commercial activity resuming in Marjah.

The assault has been billed as the biggest military operation since the 2001 US-led invasion ousted the Taliban regime, and is a major test of President Barack Obama's troop surge, which aims to turn the tide in Afghanistan.

In a vivid reminder of the Taliban's reach, suicide bombers on Friday targeted guesthouses in the heart of Kabul, killing 16 people including Westerners and Indians.

The new US-led counter-insurgency strategy, designed to allow Western troops to be drawn down by mid-2011, entails carrying out military operations then establishing civilian security and services such as hospitals and schools.

In Washington, a senior Obama administration official said Operation Mushtarak was just a preview of a wider campaign under preparation to exert control in Kandahar, the second largest Taliban stronghold after Helmand.

"Marjah (is) the tactical prelude to larger, more comprehensive operations later this year in Kandahar city," the official said on condition of anonymity.

"It's a goal for 2010. If our overall goal for 2010 is to reverse the momentum and gain time and space for the Afghan capacity, we have to get to Kandahar this year," he said.

Interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary confirmed Kandahar was the next step in an anti-Taliban campaign "which will last 18 months".

Kandahar is a cultural home to the Pashtun people and was the birthplace of the Taliban movement, which imposed an austere brand of Islam over the country from 1996 to 2001.

The anonymous administration official on Friday pointed to successes in a key part of the strategy -- Pakistan.

"In the last nine months we've seen a significant strategic shift in Pakistan (which) is the decision by the Pakistani security forces to take the fight against the Pakistani Taliban."

Pakistan has launched offensives in its lawless tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, where much of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda leadership is believed to be based.

The British embassy in Kabul said Afghan forces taking part in Mushtarak had seized more than 7,533 kilogrammes (16,600 pounds) of opium and heroin in two separate operations on February 14 and 15 in southern Helmand.