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## 'Nobody is winning,' admits McChrystal

The weakness of the Kabul government is hindering attempts by US and Nato forces to gain much ground from the insurgents

By Patrick Cockburn

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai arrived in London yesterday as US generals express doubts that the fight against the Taliban is having any success.

The US and Nato commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, who was boasting of military progress only three months ago, confessed last week that "nobody is winning". His only claim now is that the Taliban have lost momentum compared with last year.

Mr Karzai's reception in London and Washington highlights the political dilemma of the US and UK in Afghanistan since both have more or less openly denounced the corruption of his regime and the mass fraud at the polls by which he was re-elected last year.

a leaked memo, the US ambassador in Kabul, General Karl Eikenberry, said Mr Karzai was "not an adequate strategic partner" and was interested only in using foreign troops to keep himself in power. One Afghan politician, who did not want his name published, added that "the problem is not that the Taliban is strong but that the government is so weak".

Equally worrying for the American and British governments is the failure so far of General McChrystal's strategy of using his troops to seize Taliban strongholds and, once cleared, hand

them over to Afghan forces. He sold this plan, under which he was promised an extra 30,000 US troops, last November but all the signs are that it is not working. Starting in February, 15,000 US, British and Afghan troops started taking over the Taliban-held area of Marjah and Nad Ali in Helmand province. Dozens of embedded journalists trumpeted the significance of Operation Moshtarak, as it was called, as the first fruits of General McChrystal's new strategy which was meant to emulate the supposed success of the "surge" in Iraq in 2007.

Three months after the operation in Marjah, however, local people say that the Taliban still control the area at night. Shops are still closed and no schools have reopened. Education officials who returned at the height of the US-led offensive have fled again. The local governor says he has just one temporary teacher teaching 60 children in the ruins of a school. Aid is not arriving. The Taliban are replacing mines, the notorious IEDs, removed by US troops and often use the same holes to hide them in.

Pentagon officials increasingly agree with the Afghan villagers that the Marjah operation failed to end Taliban control and put the Afghan government in charge. This puts in doubt General McChrystal's whole strategy which also governs the way in which 10,000 British troops are deployed. He is being held to account for earlier optimism such as his claim at the height of Marjah offensive that "we've got a government in a box ready to roll in". Three months later, people in Marjah say they have yet to see much sign of the Afghan government.

Lack of success in Marjah is feeding doubts about the promised US-led offensive in Kandahar, parts of which are under Taliban control. The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has warned against destroying the city in order to save it. There has been an attempt by the US military to rebrand the attack "Co-operation for Kandahar". Local elders have lobbied against it on the grounds that it will bring nothing but ruin to their city.

So far the much-heralded attempt to turn the tide in Kandahar has simply terrified local people about what is to come. US and Nato supply columns thunder through the narrow streets, the soldiers guarding them gesturing menacingly to Afghan vehicles not to get too close. "An atmosphere of terror is hanging over Kandahar," Ahmad Wali Karzai, the president's much-criticised brother who is also head of the local council, is quoted as saying. "People are breathing terror here."

The Taliban are putting more effort into thwarting General McChrystal's strategy than the Afghan government is doing to implement it. In Kandahar the Taliban have stepped up a campaign of assassinations against local officials and people who co-operate with the Americans or the Kabul government. Most of the UN's international staff has left the city.

When General McChrystal's plan was adopted by President Obama it promised a quick turnaround on the ground in Afghanistan and this is demonstrably not happening. Local people say the Taliban are stronger and more active in Kandahar than they were three months ago. Veteran Taliban fighters are reported to be planning to avoid heavy losses in fighting to come while untrained teenage insurgents are gathering to battle foreign forces regardless of casualties.

Part of the US and British lack of success may be rooted in a failure to understand what happened in Iraq. The US media swallowed the official version that an alliance with the Iraqi tribes combined with new military tactics aimed at defending the civilian population had turned the tide against the Sunni Arab insurgency. There is something in this but not much. The main reasons why the Sunni Arabs ended their insurgency against the US occupation was that they were being slaughtered by the Shia-dominated government and the Sunni have been largely driven from Baghdad.

The one development over the past year which has hit the Taliban hardest happened not in Afghanistan but in Pakistan. Prodded by the US, the Pakistan army has been taking over the federally administered tribal areas along the border where the Afghan Taliban once had safe havens. Soon the army may assault North Waziristan, one of the last Afghan insurgent enclaves and one which is already under repeated attack by US Predator drones. These find their targets because Pakistani military intelligence provides detailed information.

But loss of these safe havens in Pakistan may not be such a blow to the Afghan Taliban as it would have been three years ago when they controlled less of Afghanistan. It is impossible to seal the 2,600km frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan, supposing the Pakistan army wants to do so.

The semi-official Pakistani view is that the US, Britain and Nato forces have become entangled in a civil war in Afghanistan between the Pashtun community, represented by the Taliban, and their Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara opponents who dominate the Kabul government. They expect the Pashtun to go on fighting until they get a real share in power. One Pashtun, a former colonel in the Pakistani army, said: "It will be difficult for the Americans and British to win the hearts and minds of the people in southern Afghanistan since at the centre of Pashtun culture is a hatred of all foreigners."