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U.S. Faces Resentment in Afghan Region

By Carlotta Gall

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LASHKAR GAH — The mood of the Afghan people has tipped into a popular revolt in some parts of southern Afghanistan, presenting incoming American forces with an even harder job than expected in reversing military losses to the Taliban and winning over the population.

Villagers in some districts have taken up arms against foreign troops to protect their homes or in anger after losing relatives in airstrikes, several community representatives interviewed said. Others have been moved to join the insurgents out of poverty or simply because the Taliban's influence is so pervasive here.

On Thursday morning, 4,000 American Marines began a major offensive to try to take back the region from the strongest Taliban insurgency in the country. The Marines are part of a larger deployment of additional troops being ordered by the new American commander in Afghanistan,

Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, to concentrate not just on killing Taliban fighters but on protecting the population.

Yet Taliban control of the countryside is so extensive in provinces like Kandahar and Helmand that winning districts back will involve tough fighting and may ignite further tensions, residents and local officials warn. The government has no presence in 5 of Helmand's 13 districts, and in several others, like Nawa, it holds only the district town, where troops and officials live virtually under siege.

Taliban influence is so strong in rural areas that much of the local population has accepted their rule and is watching the United States troop build-up with trepidation. Villagers interviewed in late June said that they preferred to be left alone under Taliban rule and complained about artillery and airstrikes by foreign forces. "We Muslims don't like them — they are the source of danger," said Hajji Taj Mohammed, a local villager, of the foreign forces. His house in Marja, a town west of this provincial capital that has been a major opium trading post and Taliban base, was bombed two months ago, he said.

The southern provinces have suffered the worst civilian casualties since NATO's deployment to the region in 2006. Thousands of people have already been displaced by fighting and taken refuge in the towns.

"Now there are more people siding with the Taliban than with the government," said Abdul Qader Nurzai, head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission in southern Afghanistan.

In many places, people have never seen or felt the presence of the Afghan government, or foreign forces, except through violence, but the Taliban are a known quantity, community leaders said.

"People are hostages of the Taliban, but they look at the coalition also as the enemy, because they have not seen anything good from them in seven or eight years," said Hajji Abdul Ahad Helmandwal, a district council leader from Nad'ali in Helmand Province.

Foreign troops continue to make mistakes that enrage whole sections of this deeply tribal society, such as the killing of a tribal elder's son and his wife as they were driving to their home in Helmand two months ago. Only their baby daughter survived. The tribal elder, Reis-e-Baghran, a former member of the Taliban who reconciled with the government, is one of the most influential figures in Helmand.

The infusion of more American troops into southern Afghanistan is aimed at ending a stalemate between NATO and Taliban forces. The governor of Helmand, Gulab Mangal, said extra forces were needed since the Taliban were now so entrenched in southern Afghanistan that they had permanent bases from which they mounted operations.

Last year an American Marine Expeditionary Unit of 2,400 men cleared and secured a small but critical area in the district of Garmser in southern Helmand, choking off Taliban supply routes

from the Pakistani border while reopening the town for commerce. The operation had a crippling effect on Taliban forces operating further north in neighboring Oruzgan Province, according to Jelani Popal, who oversees local governance for President Hamid Karzai's government.

This year military officials hope to replicate that operation in more places, squeezing the Taliban and cutting off movement of fighters, weapons and narcotics, the Taliban's main source of income, from the border into southern Afghanistan, according to Lt. Gen. James Dutton, the British deputy commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The extra forces will be critical to create confidence among the local population and persuade insurgents to give up the fight, Mr. Mangal said. "If the people are assured and get the security in their villages and towns with the new forces, then they will be able to raise their voices," he said.

Yet he and others warn that there will be more bloodshed and that the large influx of foreign forces could prompt a backlash.

In parts of Helmand and Kandahar, resentment and frustration are rampant. People who traveled to Lashkar Gah from the districts complained of continued civilian suffering and questioned American intentions.

"They come here just to fight, not to bring peace," said Allah Nazad, a farmer.

People from Marja said that foreign troops carrying out counter-narcotics operations conducted nighttime raids on houses, shot people dead inside their homes and used dogs that bit the occupants.

"The people are very scared of the night raids," said Spin Gul, a farmer from the area. "When they have night raids, the people join the Taliban and fight."

"Who are the Taliban? They are local people," interjected another man who did not give his name.

One man, Hamza, said he would fight if foreigners came to raid his house. "I will not allow them," he said. "I will fight them to the last drop of blood."

Many do not side with the Taliban out of choice, however, and could be won over, community leaders said.

Fazel Muhammad, a member of the district council of Panjwai, an area west of Kandahar city where three years of fighting have ruined livelihoods, said he knew people who were laying mines for the Taliban in order to feed their families. He estimated that 80 percent of insurgents were local people driven to fight out of poverty and despair. Offered another way out, only 2 percent would support the Taliban, he said.

Yet mistrust of the government remains so strong that even if the Taliban is defeated militarily, the government and the American-led coalition will find the population reluctant to cooperate,

said Haji Abdullah Jan, the head of the provincial council of Helmand.

“These people will still not trust the government,” he said. “Even if security is 100 percent, it will take time because the government did not keep its promises in the past.”