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McClatchy Washington Bureau

Afghan insurgents learn to destroy key U.S. armored vehicle

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WASHINGTON — Taliban-led insurgents in Afghanistan have devised ways to cripple and even destroy the expensive armored vehicles that offer U.S. forces the best protection against roadside bombs by using increasingly large explosive charges and rocket-propelled grenades, according to U.S. soldiers and defense officials.

At least eight American troops have been killed this year in attacks on so-called Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles, or MRAPs, and 40 more have been wounded, said a senior U.S. military official who, like others interviewed on the issue, declined to be further identified because of the issue's sensitivity.

The insurgents' success in attacking the hulking machines, which can cost as much as \$1 million each, underscores their ability to counter the advanced hardware that the U.S. military and its allies are deploying in their struggle to gain the upper hand in the war, which entered its ninth year last month.

The attacks also raise questions about how vulnerable a new, lighter MRAP, the M-ATV, which is now being shipped to Afghanistan, are to the massive explosive charges that Taliban-led insurgents have been using against its bigger cousin.

The insurgents are also hitting MRAPs with rocket-propelled grenades that can penetrate their steel armor, according to U.S. troops in Afghanistan, several of whom showed McClatchy a photograph of a hole that one of the projectiles had punched in the hull of an MRAP.

The Pentagon has spent more than \$26.8 billion to develop and build three versions of the largest MRAPs, totaling some 16,000 vehicles, mostly for the Army and Marine Corps, according to an August report by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

Another \$5.4 billion is being spent to produce 5,244 M-ATVs, the smaller version that U.S. defense officials contend offers as much protection as the large models do, but is more maneuverable and better suited to Afghanistan's dirt tracks and narrow mountain roads.

"The traditional MRAP was having real problems . . . off road in Afghanistan," said Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell. "And clearly we have to do a lot of work off-road. And these new vehicles will provide our forces the ability to travel more safely off road — certainly off paved roads — than they would have been able to do with other vehicles."

Defense officials acknowledged the growing problem of successful attacks on MRAPs, and said the U.S. military is constantly developing improvements for the vehicle that include better sensors and tactics.

"It's not all about the armor. We can't build something that is impervious to everything," said Navy Capt. Jack Henzlik, a spokesman for the U.S. Central Command, which oversees operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. "We are using a comprehensive strategy to try to provide for the protection of our forces."

The issue was the subject of a high-level meeting convened on Wednesday by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who made the production of MRAPs his highest priority in 2007 as U.S. troops in Iraq were suffering massive casualties from roadside bomb attacks.

The use of powerful explosive charges against MRAPs "is a problem that he (Gates) is keenly aware of, very concerned about, and is determined to make sure this building is doing everything it can to combat," Morrell said. "We have never advertised MRAPs or M-ATVs as a silver bullet for the IED (improvised explosive device) problem. This is but one element of a vast array of capabilities that we need to bring to bear to protect our forces."

However, retired Army Col. Douglas A. MacGregor, a former armored cavalry commander and combat veteran and an expert on armor warfare, said that vehicles such as the MRAP have "very limited utility" in a war against a guerrilla group such as the Taliban.

"The notion of a wheeled armored constabulary force as a prescription for a close combat situation is nonsense," he said.

U.S. troops rely on the MRAP's V-shaped hull, which is designed to deflect explosive blasts, and heavy armored plating to protect them against the landmines and IEDs that are causing most American combat deaths in Afghanistan.

October was the deadliest month for U.S. troops since the 2001 U.S. invasion. At least 59 were killed, bringing the total for the year to at least 272 dead, according to the Internet site iCasualties. At least 139 of those troops died in IED blasts, according to the Pentagon.

"Pentagon officials note that insurgents are building larger IEDs and are finding better ways to conceal them," the Congressional Research Service report said.

"The biggest question is what took them so long," said a senior Pentagon official with extensive experience with the MRAP program and familiarity with the weapons and techniques that the militants in Afghanistan have developed to "compromise" the vehicle.

The fact that the large MRAPs — which range from 7 tons to 24 tons depending on the model — often are confined to narrow mountain roads and valleys in Afghanistan has made it easier for insurgents to prepare ambushes using anti-tank mines, IEDs or rocket-propelled grenades capable of penetrating armor, the official said.

U.S. defense officials insisted that many more U.S. troops would be killed and injured in Afghanistan and in Iraq if they'd been equipped with vehicles other than MRAPs.

"KIA (killed in action) rates in particular are noticeably reduced in MRAPs," said Irene Smith, a spokeswoman for the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, the Pentagon agency created to develop defenses against roadside bombs.

U.S. defense officials in Washington and Kabul declined to reveal the number of MRAPs that have been crippled or destroyed since the first vehicles were deployed in Afghanistan in 2003, saying they didn't want to provide the Taliban with information on the effectiveness of their tactics.

McClatchy is voluntarily withholding some U.S. soldiers' descriptions of insurgent tactics out of concern that they may not be known by all of those fighting U.S.-led forces.

The soldiers spoke out of what they said was a heightened concern about the vehicles' vulnerability to ambushes, especially on mountain roads where there's no room for the vehicles to turn around.