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European Languages

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AFP

## Bagram Ready for More Casualties

December 01, 2009

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan -- Medics and Air Force pilots at the main U.S. base in Afghanistan are gearing up for the grim reality of the new U.S. war strategy -- a likely escalation in the number of casualties in an increasingly bloody battlefield.

The expected dispatch of thousands of new troops come on top of 21,000 already ordered by President Barack Obama earlier this year in a bid to turn around the conflict now into its ninth year since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion ousted the Taliban regime.

The task of U.S. Air Force based at Bagram Air Field outside Kabul in pulling bodies out of remote parts of the war-ravaged country is taking centre stage as military officers say more soldiers will mean more deaths and injuries.

"Forty thousand more troops means 40,000 more targets at risk," said Col. Joseph Chozinski, head of the Heate N. Craig Joint Theatre Hospital, the main staging point at the Bagram Air Field for the war wounded.

At least 485 foreign troops have already died in Afghanistan so far this year, including 299 Americans, up from an overall total of 295 in 2008. Since the invasion, a total of 1,532 foreign troops have died.

Obama has issued orders and briefed world leaders on his new strategy expected to send between 30,000 and 35,000 more troops to Afghanistan, on top of more than 100,000 fighting under U.S. and NATO command.

But as Taliban insurgents spread their footprint across wider swathes of the country and plant increasingly sophisticated bombs, the Airmen based at Bagram outside Kabul can expect to get even busier.

Air force pilots and nurses on the base are confronted daily with the reality of war.

The biggest killer of foreign troops are IEDs, or the improvised explosive devices, the Taliban weapons of choice that have become the pivot on which the Afghan war is turning.

The roadside bombs are cheap and easy to make, difficult to detect and are mostly detonated by remote control, hence their heavy toll.

The injuries they inflict are horrific -- those who survive often lose limbs, eyes, internal organs and the ability to function normally.

U.S. nurse Laila Coles has seen her share of the results of IED attacks. Every flight she is on has three or four victims, she said, adding: "Almost every one involves a loss of limb."

The youngest victim she has seen was a 14-year-old Afghan boy probably injured while planting an IED. The Taliban are known to pay impoverished villagers up to 200 dollars -- more than a year's income for most Afghans -- to plant IEDs.

While the U.S. military refuses to disclose how many of its soldiers have been killed by IEDs, they say that most of the wounded treated at Bagram are victims of IED attacks, with 30 percent involving the loss of a limb.

The very badly hurt are flown out immediately, mostly to the U.S. base at Ramstein, Germany, sometimes even receiving critical care on the way.

Chozinski said that although the numbers are classified, IED admissions have broken records for the past three months. Yet despite the growing numbers "we have still not figured out how to deal with all IED injuries".

More research is needed, he said, particularly in cases where soldiers survive multiple blasts without any outward sign of injury.

The escalating use of roadside bombs, coupled with the unforgiving terrain and poor roads, force the coalition to rely on costly air transport.

Since the Taliban regime was pushed from power, air has become the safest form of transport in Afghanistan, said Colonel "Shool" Schulstad, pilot of one of the C-130 aircraft that form part of the Afghan air bridge.

As well as ferrying the dead and wounded, Schulstad and his fellow pilots make about three scheduled return flights a day, carrying everything from food and water to weapons and ammunition to forward operating bases in the battle zone.

The Air Force says that in the last 12 months it has flown an average of 1,000 people a day around Afghanistan, including soldiers, civilians and casualties, and that the cost of supplying troops by air has risen sharply.

Supplying the Afghan war effort by air in 2007 cost 388.4 million dollars. By mid-November, the cost for this year so far had hit 779.9 million dollars.

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