

Oklahoma Guard to help Afghans' agriculture skills

BY BRYAN DEAN
The Oklahoman

OKLAHOMA CITY — Col. Mike Chase's next deployment will draw more on his experience raising cattle on his 80-acre property near Chandler than anything he's picked up on the shooting range.

Chase is putting together a team of about 50 Oklahoma National Guard soldiers for a deployment to Afghanistan, where their primary mission will be to help local villagers improve their agricultural skills.

It's a new mission for the Oklahoma National Guard, and one Chase said he's eager to serve.

"Instead of fighting people, we hope we can help them develop their country," Chase said.

The group hasn't been officially mobilized yet, but Chase

said he expects the deployment will begin in October.

War for cucumbers

One of the unique challenges the U.S. military faces as it tries to fight insurgents in Afghanistan is a lack of infrastructure.

Afghanistan is a more agrarian society than Iraq, where oil wealth has helped foster communications networks, roads and other essential needs. Chase said agriculture accounts for about 45 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product and employs about 80 percent of the country.

"With Iraq's oil situation, there are a lot of people willing to help bring that country on line," Chase said. "With Afghanistan, I don't think anyone could accuse the United States of going to war for their cucumbers."

Unfortunately, Afghanistan also has had a tumultuous

OSU to help

Oklahoma National Guardsmen tasked with training local farmers and ranchers in Afghanistan will get help from Oklahoma State University.

David Henneberry, director of OSU's international agriculture program, said the school will alter a training program usually given for missionaries and others wishing to help develop agriculture in Third World countries, tailoring it to the challenges the Guard will face in Afghanistan.

In particular, the program will help soldiers

who already have experience in agriculture understand the more primitive techniques and technologies in a country where farming and ranching are far different than the version Oklahomans are used to seeing.

Henneberry said the training also will stress the importance of working with those who are already trying to improve things in the country.

"We forget that they have institutions like universities and an agriculture ministry," Henneberry said. "They have been thinking about these things themselves and making progress, and we need to partner with them and respect the work they've done in the past."

history that has stifled agricultural development over the past 30 years.

Afghanistan has become the world's leading producer of opium as local farmers have turned to growing poppies because it is a more lucrative trade than traditional crops.

Persuading Afghan farmers to grow wheat and other staples instead of opium is

a primary goal of western military allies who are trying to stabilize the country, said Maj. Gen. Myles Deering, the state's adjutant general.

"This is something unique the Guard brings that the Army generally can't bring," Deering said. "We have soldiers with agricultural degrees and practical experience farming as their primary

occupation."

Army National Guard units from several agriculturally-inclined states have already deployed, and Oklahoma is next.

Feeding themselves

Chase will lead the team and has put out the word for volunteers. The group will include a command staff along

with a security detail.

"The core of it is really the agricultural team, which will be about 12 to 14 people with specialized experience in horticulture, livestock, small business and animal husbandry," Chase said.

Volunteers so far include soldiers who have taught agriculture at the high school and college level.

Chase said he expects Oklahoma Guard members will be eager to be involved in such a unique mission.

"You are directly helping the people instead of just indirectly," Chase said. "We're helping a country feed themselves and take care of themselves."

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U.S., Karzai to review Afghan war progress

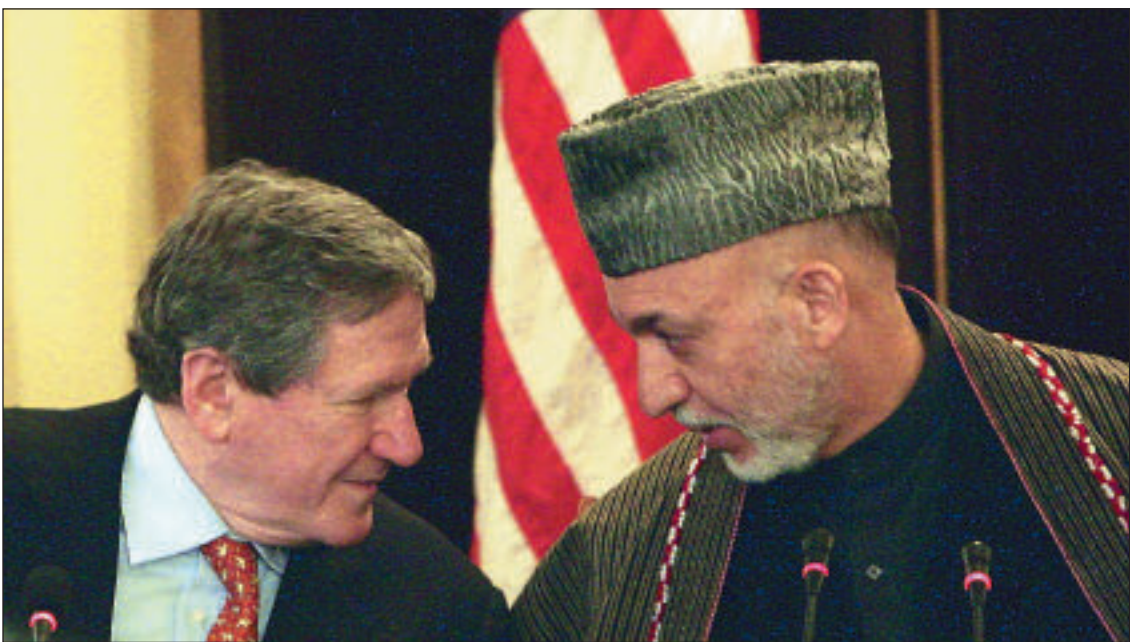
• Obama has yet to speak with the Afghan president.

KABUL (AP) — President Hamid Karzai and President Barack Obama's special envoy said Sunday that Afghan officials will take part in a strategic U.S. review of the Afghanistan war, a hint of U.S.-Afghan cooperation in an otherwise awkward joint appearance.

Obama has said turning around the war in Afghanistan is one of his top priorities, but after almost four weeks in office he has yet to speak with the Afghan leader.

Instead, Karzai met with envoy Richard Holbrooke, and the two appeared together to announce the Afghan government's participation in a U.S. review that will in large part determine how the war is fought. The decision, Holbrooke said, came at Karzai's request in a letter to Obama.

Karzai acknowledged in an interview Friday that he has



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (right) whispers to Richard Holbrooke, U.S. special representative to Pakistan and Afghanistan, ahead of a news conference Sunday at the presidential palace in Kabul, Afghanistan.

MUSADEQ SADEQ/
Associated Press

yet to speak with Obama, a clear signal from America's leader of Karzai's standing, given the fact the U.S. has 33,000 troops in the country and is contemplating sending up to 30,000 more.

That undercurrent hung

over the first high-level U.S.-Afghan meeting since the inauguration and was perhaps one reason Karzai's shoulders appeared heavy and his mood lifeless.

In an interview later Sunday with Afghanistan's Tolo TV,

Holbrooke was asked about the Karzai-Obama relationship. He said friends often disagree: "I don't see the issue."

"President Karzai is the democratically elected president of this country, and we respect that," Holbrooke said.

"And I deal with them, as I just did, without any friction, with honest discussions. There was no problem, no animosity, and President Karzai himself went out of his way to be gracious and supportive to our delegation."

Iraqi election officials say some ballot fraud occurred

BY QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA
Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi officials acknowledged Sunday that there was some fraud in last month's provincial elections but not enough to force a new vote in any province.

Faraj al-Haidari, chairman of the election commission, said final results of the Jan. 31 voting would be certified and announced this week.

Voters chose members of ruling provincial councils in an election seen as a dress rehearsal for parliamentary balloting by the end of the year.

The U.S. hailed the absence of major violence during the elections, expressing hope they would help cement security gains of the past year.

Despite the drop in violence, a U.S. soldier was killed Sunday by a roadside bomb in southern Iraq, the U.S. announced.

At least three other people were killed by attacks Sunday in other parts of the country, according to police.

Preliminary election results from last month's balloting were announced Feb. 5 and showed Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's ticket swept to victory over Shiite religious parties in Baghdad and southern Iraq — a strong endorsement of his security efforts.

Al-Haidari told The Associated Press that ballots in more than 30 polling stations nationwide were nullified because of fraud but that was not enough to declare

the election a failure.

He gave no further details. But one official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the most widespread fraud appeared to have occurred in Diyala province, which has large Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish communities and an ongoing insurgency.

A coalition including the Iraqi Islamic Party, the largest Sunni political group, led in Diyala with 21.1 percent of the vote followed by a Kurdish alliance with 17.2 percent, according to preliminary results.

Al-Maliki's coalition finished fourth in Diyala with 9.5 percent.

U.S. officials have been closely watching the Diyala results for signs of friction between Arabs and Kurds, who are the biggest community in the far north of the province.

The Kurds were hoping that a strong Kurdish show-

ing in those areas would bolster their case for incorporating parts of the province into the Kurdish self-ruled region.

In the south, al-Maliki's Dawa party and its coalition allies prevailed over their main Shiite rival, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, which has close links to Iran.

That victory was partly driven by public backlash against what many Iraqis see as undue Iranian influence in their country.

Hundreds of thousands of Shiite pilgrims converged on Karbala in recent days to celebrate the end of 40 days of mourning that follow the anniversary of the seventh-century death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein, one of Shiite Islam's most revered saints.

The Karbala ceremonies culminate before dawn Monday.

DAILY U.S. CASUALTIES

Iraq: As of Sunday, at least 4,246 members of the U.S. military had died in the Iraq war since it began in March 2003.

The latest deaths reported by the military:

- A U.S. soldier was killed Sunday by a roadside bomb in southern Iraq.
- A U.S. soldier died Saturday in a noncombat-related incident in Iraq.

No new identifications were reported by the military.

Afghanistan: As of Sunday, at least 576 members of the U.S. military had died in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan as a result of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, according to the Defense Department.

No new U.S. deaths were reported by the military.

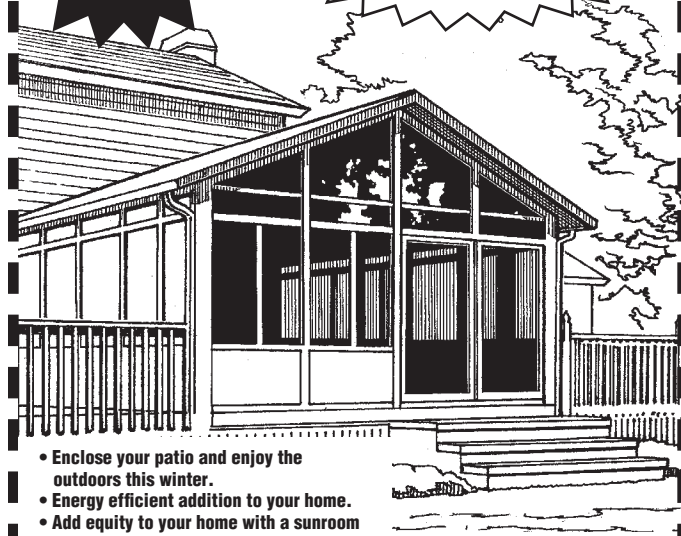
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