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## **U.S. COMMANDER: PROGRESS IN FIGHTING THE TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN**

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The top U.S. commander here said the expanded military authorization granted by President Obama last month has led to more aggressive targeting of insurgent leaders by U.S. and Afghan forces and helped Afghans military shift to an offensive mindset.

Were able to target critical nodes in the enemy organization and take out leaders and this has a significant impact, Gen. John Nicholson said in an interview Sunday at this sprawling air base.

The new authorities allow U.S. military forces to provide airstrikes and other help to Afghan forces conducting major offensive operations that are part of the Afghan militarys campaign plan against the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

Prior to the new order, U.S. airstrikes and other assistance was largely limited to protecting American forces and rescuing Afghan forces in extreme circumstances, such as preventing a key town from falling into Taliban control.

Nicholson said Afghan military leaders have told him their forces were more reactive last year, but they are now taking initiative in the fight against the Taliban and other insurgents, in part because of the expanded authority.

Were seeing a shift in mindset, Nicholson told USA TODAY. They see the value of going on the offensive.

Helping target regional commanders, who hold significant influence over their followers, is only part of what the authorization allows, but the effect has been significant.

When the leader is killed, it causes a degree of disruption that you wouldnt see in a Western army, Nicholson said.

The targeting of Taliban leaders was also given a boost by a robust force of 17,000 Afghan commandos and other special forces. The elite forces specialize in conducting raids against insurgent leaders and other special missions.

About 80% of the operations by Afghan special forces are conducted without any coalition assistance, according to military statistics.

In addition to the new authorities, Obama also agreed to maintain 8,400 U.S. troops here through the end of his term, reversing his earlier plan to reduce the troop level to 5,500 by next year. U.S. allies have also agreed to continue providing troops and financial support for Afghanistan into the

future.

The developments come as the Taliban struggles with a leadership succession following the death of leader Mohammed Akhtar Mansour, who was killed by a U.S. drone strike in May.

Mansour was replaced by Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, but Mansour kept a tight hold on the organizations resources. His death disrupted their financial situation, in addition to causing fissures in the groups leadership, Nicholson said.

Nicholson cautioned there was no silver bullet to defeat the Taliban, but the expansion of authorities, higher troop levels, the killing of Mansour and the international commitment to continue funding Afghan forces helped boost the confidence of Afghan forces.

The coalition command had expected an increase in Taliban activity at the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, but such a spike has not yet materialized.

Still, the Taliban has proved remarkably resilient in the past, and Afghan forces have taken heavy casualties in the fighting since assuming the lead against the Taliban two years ago.

A report by the Institute for the Study of War, a think tank, said that Afghan security forces still face major capability shortfalls even with the new authorities and the slowing of the U.S. withdrawal.

These measures are appropriate, but insufficient to close the readiness gap of the (Afghan security forces) \* or bring Taliban militants to the negotiating table, the report said. The next president of the United States will inherit a challenge in Afghanistan in January 2017, even with current troop levels and increased authorities for supporting (Afghan military) offensive missions.

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Kaynak/Source: