

## Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson via teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan

Press Operations

General John W. Nicholson Jr., commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan  
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STAFF: Good morning, everyone.

Today, we are joined by U.S. Army General John Nicholson. General Nicholson is the commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, and he joins us from Kabul. He has 45 minutes this morning.

Of note: Today's counternarcotics operation is being conducted under the U.S. Forces Afghanistan authorities, and not NATO's Resolute Support. We'll start with a quick radio check. Sir, how do you hear us?

GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON: (inaudible).

STAFF: A little -- a little garbled, sir. (Laughter.)

GEN. NICHOLSON: Okay. Hey, I'm coming across a little garbled here, guys. Is there a problem? Little garbled here -- they're reporting we're a little garbled. Is this any better, (Mike ?)? Over.

STAFF: No, sir, but I think we're probably just going to have to press on.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Okay.

Okay, (Mike ?). How's that? Any better?

STAFF: That's much better. Over.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Okay. Got it. I'll hold the mic.

Okay. You ready for me to start, here?

STAFF: Yes, sir.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Okay. Great. Thank you.

Well thanks, Mike, and thanks, everyone, for joining me today. I also want to reference a statement made by President Ghani this morning regarding our strikes yesterday. And I'd also like to thank him, as well as General Yaftali, the Chief of General Staff of the Afghan army, who

joined me earlier for a joint press conference here in Kabul. So I refer you all to those, as well.

And I'm currently scheduled to be back with you next week, as well, to talk about the 2017 season, and looking ahead to 2018. I recognize we may get into some of that today, as well. But primarily, I'm going to talk about the strikes we've done in the last 24 hours.

So the south -- the new South Asia strategy's not quite 90 days old. And under this strategy, I received new authorities -- and this is for U.S. Forces Afghanistan -- again, thanks, Mike, for highlighting that -- and these new authorities allowed us to attack the enemy across the breadth and the depth of the battle space, and also functionally, to attack their financial networks, their revenue streams.

Previously, the authorities required us to be operating in proximity to Afghan forces, so we could strike when they were in the defense, we could strike when they were -- (inaudible). But our targets that went after revenue streams, support infrastructure, training bases, infiltration lanes -- these targets were much harder to get to, and really were not a part of the authority.

So the new authorities have been significant in that, in enabling us to get after the enemy in new ways. And so that's what I'm going to focus on in my statement, then, these strikes. They were led by the Afghan Security Forces yesterday, with air strikes against drug labs in Helmand.

But the primary focus of this particular operation's been in Northern Helmand, the so-called emirate of the Taliban, where they have enjoyed relative freedom of action for the last several years and where much of their drug enterprise is located.

So the Afghan air force led these strikes yesterday with A-29 attacks against drug labs. And then, last night, they were supported by the U.S. Air Force, with B-52s and other strike aircraft, to include the F-22 Raptor.

This -- these also complemented Afghan Special Forces strikes. So a raid went in yesterday against a Taliban prison in Now Zad. And then these also complemented conventional offensive operations being conducted by the 215th Corps in Central Helmand.

So there's a just -- this is much more than just a series of air strikes in Northern Helmand. It's part of a larger, comprehensive campaign plan, and it's part of our sustainment of offensive operations through the winter against the enemy's financial engine in Helmand.

This -- in order to do these strikes -- they required hundreds of hours of preparation, our intelligence enterprise, ISR, as well as the actual sorties flown last night and in the coming days, because this will continue.

I want to -- I want to mention the -- before getting into more detail on the strikes -- over the last several years -- the last three years, in particular, since the end of ISAF, the Afghan Security Forces have really been carrying the war to the enemy -- to the Taliban, the Haqqani Network

and ISIS.

It's been a tough fight. In the last year, we've seen offensive operations, kind of unprecedented over the last few years, by the Afghan security forces. At one point, we had all six corps conducting offensive operations simultaneously around the country. And this I would contrast with last year -- in 2017, when in October, we saw attacks on cities -- four cities simultaneously, at the same time, so big change from the past.

The special forces, the special police, the air force have all continued to grow in capability, and they're -- and they're all making great appearances on the battlefield. The commandos in particular have never lost a battle against the Taliban, and we are doubling the size of the commandos. So that is going to be a significant addition to the offensive arsenal of the Afghan security forces.

This has not been without cost. I want to take a moment to recognize and show our respect for the bravery and the sacrifice of Afghan security forces and the hard work of their government. They are fighting corruption, they're fighting external influence and terrorism, not just for the benefit of their own country and the region, but indeed, the entire world.

And so our message to the Afghans is very straightforward: We are with you, and we will stay with you. And their fight on terror is the most important fight in the world, and it's -- and it's a fight on behalf of us, as well as them. It's a fight that makes our homeland secure and the homelands of our coalition secure, as well as the Afghans'.

And the Afghans really deserve security and a lasting peace. And that stability that would come with that would help significantly to reduce the threat of terrorism from the region, and migrancy, as well.

So let me shift back again to our operations over the last 24 hours. These are a demonstration of our -- of our new authorities. They're also a demonstration of our will to take the fight to the enemy in all of its dimensions. And specifically, in striking northern Helmand and the drug enterprises there, we're hitting the Taliban where it hurts, which is their finances.

Now, the -- in 2017, again, I'll elaborate more today or next week -- the Taliban failed to meet any of their military objectives. They failed to take any cities, as they've attempted for the last two years. They suffered a significant amount of casualties from the Afghan-led offensive operations. And we are -- we are seeing signs of friction and disagreement within the Taliban leadership ranks.

They know they cannot win -- they can't win in the face of this growing capability. In September, we saw them, in the face of these tactical setbacks, take a knee and change their tactics. And so they're -- they decided to stop attacking cities, stop attack -- trying to seize and hold terrain, and instead shift to suicide attacks and attempts to inflict casualties to prove their relevance.

And so this, actually, is a step back in terms of enemy tactics to a guerrilla warfare type of strategy, from one where they attempt to seize and hold terrain.

Now, the Taliban are interested, though, in making money, and to some extent it's fair to say that this movement has evolved into a narco-insurgency, so that the profits from narcotics now exceed their operating expenses, and we find that the leadership of the Taliban fight over the money, and it's often divided along tribal lines.

This -- they make their money in a couple of ways. One is the narcotics trafficking; second, illegal mining; kidnapping for hire; murder; et cetera. So, largely, they've evolved into a criminal organization and truly fit the definition of a narco-insurgency.

Our message to the enemy is that you cannot win the war. It's time to lay down your arms and enter into a reconciliation process. And if they -- if they don't, they're going to be confined to irrelevance, as the Afghans expand their control of the country, or death. And so these are the choices they face.

So let me take a moment to describe what the ANDSF and U.S. forces struck yesterday. As we all know, heroin's become a global problem -- health, economic, security concerns. And so, just like terror, heroin and opiates have become a global issue. The -- these criminals living in Afghanistan, who are closely linked to the Taliban and part of the Taliban, are responsible for up to 85 percent of the world's opium.

It's an illegal economy that, in terms of street value, is something close to \$60 billion, as estimated by our law enforcement agencies. We currently estimate, I'm told by our law enforcement professionals, that about 4 percent of the heroin in the U.S. is from Afghanistan, but that they expect that that number might grow.

We also see that it -- that Afghan heroin has made inroads in most of the other areas around the world, to include as close as Canada, Europe, Russia, Iran, and of course all across the Balkans, et cetera.

So at least \$200 million of this opium industry goes in -- into -- into the Taliban's bank accounts, and this fuels -- really pays for the insurgency. So, increasingly, a fight to retain control of the areas of poppy production -- and we see that the vast majority of the poppy grown in Afghanistan is grown in Taliban-controlled or contested areas.

The -- I need to make the point here that we are not going after the farmers who are growing the poppy. They are largely compelled to grow the poppy. And this is kind of a tragic part of the story. When the farmer can't pay their debts, they end up -- the Taliban end up taking their sons or daughters as collateral, or they -- or they simply live in debt, a form a slavery, to the Taliban. And when they live in a Taliban-controlled area, they essentially are required to grow opium as a -- as a price for being there.

So these strikes are focused on -- on the places where the poppy's processed further, eventually, into heroin -- into opium, morphine, and then heroin. So we attack the drug traffic organizations that operate in this area. There's about 20 drug trafficking -- major drug trafficking organizations in the region -- the APAC region, 13 in Afghanistan, and seven of these have operations in Helmand. And this is why the strikes started there.

So the -- I have to say also that the level of trust and cooperation that exists between the United States and Afghanistan has never been better. And it's because of this that we're able to conduct these kind of joint operations, and we're able to do these operations with the full support and, indeed, leadership of the Afghan government.

So President Ghani's -- the palace issued a statement earlier today about these strikes. They were fully aware of these strikes, and consulted. And indeed, it was a joint operation on the ground, within their capabilities.

So all of this adds up to a form of pressure on the enemy. We will continue to apply military pressure on the battlefield. That pressure's going to grow in the coming years, as the offensive capability of the Afghans grow through their growth in Special Forces, the growth in the air force. And again, I'll talk a little bit more about that all next week.

We're also seeing diplomatic and economic pressure applied by the international community, especially on the external enablers of the insurgency. And then soon, the elections in Afghanistan, if done credibly -- and this is extremely important, of course -- this will apply social pressure on the enemy.

And so these forms of pressure, military, diplomatic, economic, social, are the -- are the things that will mean that the Taliban cannot win. These forms of pressure is what will compel them to join the reconciliation process.

So now what I'd like to do is take a moment and step you through a few videos that cover some of the strikes last night. So I'll give you a short description of this first video, and then ask Mike to play it.

So, in the first one, you're going to see a strike by a U.S. B-52. This is on a Taliban narcotics production facility in Northern Helmand. We used six 500-pound, low-collateral-damage, precision-guided munitions. Why did we use these? In order to keep the collateral damage to an absolute minimum, and we did.

So this strike -- these kinds of strikes are a result of numerous hours of surveillance, not only of the region to pinpoint the specific objectives, but the objective itself to ensure that we come up with the best targeting solution to minimize the collateral damage.

And so, Mike, if you could please roll the first video.

STAFF: The first video is complete.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Okay. Thanks, Mike.

Okay, the second video is a strike that's being carried out by an F-22 Raptor, which, as you know, is one of our most advanced fighter aircraft. This aircraft was used because of its ability to deliver precision munitions, in this case a 250-pound bomb, small-diameter, that causes the minimum amount of collateral damage.

And so this target was also a Taliban narcotics production facility in Musa Qala. So I want to draw your attention -- as you look at this strike, you're going to see that inside this compound are multiple structures, and we destroy only two of them, while leaving the third standing, which we did to avoid collateral damage.

And so, Mike, if you could please play that video.

STAFF: Video is complete, sir.

GEN. NICHOLSON: There's another B-52 strike on another Taliban narcotics production facility. Now, this particular facility was the largest one we struck last night, with over 50 barrels of opium cooking at the time of the strike. And, of course, this -- the street value of this is in the millions of dollars. So this was a B-52 strike, several 2,000-pound bombs, and it completely obliterated the facility.

So please roll that video, Mike.

STAFF: Video is complete, sir.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Okay, great.

At this time, Mike, I'll turn it back to you for questions.

STAFF: Okay, thanks, sir.

We'll start off with Tom Bowman, NPR.

Q: General, thanks for doing this.

Could you talk about how many districts the Taliban now control or influence, compared to last year? Has it increased? Has the number dropped? Or has it roughly stayed the same as last year?

And also, you said you're going after the drug labs. What about the poppy crop itself, when it comes back in the spring? Will you also go after the crop? Or do you leave it up to the Afghan

forces, once they take over those areas of Helmand?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Yes, Tom, thanks for the question. Thanks for your visit here, also.

The districts -- the amount of -- the amount of control by the -- by the Afghan force is roughly the same as last year. So you'll remember that, of course, we got the policy decision in late August -- 21 August. So, we essentially fought, in 2017, at the lowest level of capability that the U.S. has had in Afghanistan in the entire war.

And so, this month, we were at a higher level of risk. So the -- so the fighting depended heavily on the Afghans. And they went on the offensive, and we supported them within our capabilities.

But a couple of things changed over the summer: One, of course, we got the policy decision. Two, things have gone well in Iraq and Syria. So we're beginning to see the effects of a shift of resources, which will increase over the course of the winter, going into the spring, as the situation continues to improve there. So the assets we used for these strikes, for example, were available from across the AOR.

So, again, about the same as last year in terms of territory and population control. We didn't see the enemy attempt to take cities like they did previously. They did attempt to take some districts, but they suffered heavily and then the -- and then, because of the offensive operations of the Afghans, they were able to take back some districts.

One example would be Nawa district in central Helmand. It was under the control of the Taliban for two years. The Afghan Army and 215th Corps took it back this summer. Ghorak district in Kandahar -- under control of the enemy. The 205th Core took it back last month. Kunduz -- we killed most of the leadership of the Pamir Network in and around Kunduz. This enabled the security around Kunduz to improve significantly this year over last, when it was attacked four times.

So these are just a few examples. But the net effect was we're at about the same spot we were. Now, the difference going into next year, of course, is going to be this increased offensive capability that I referred to. Over.

Q: As far as the poppy crop, will you -- will you and the Afghan government go after the crop itself, or leave it up to the Afghans once they take over more area?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Right, Tom. So what we're seeing is -- so the immediate answer to your question -- this is interdiction. This is us going after narcotics production facilities. This operation does not represent in any way going after the farmers or after the crops.

Okay, so the -- what we -- what we're finding, though, is that the poppy -- the growth in poppy production has been in those areas that are either under Taliban control, or are contested. And,

as I mentioned, that's about a third of the country.

So two-thirds of the country, the population is under government control, and then about a third is either under Taliban control, or contested. So, of that one-third, maybe 20, 20 to 25 percent is contested. This is where most of the poppy is being grown. Eighty -- something like 80 to 85 percent of the poppy is being grown in these areas.

So, as the government expands its control through offensive operations and brings those areas back under government control, then we expect to see those areas under cultivation, when the farmers have a choice and they don't necessarily -- they aren't forced in to growing poppy -- we believe the government, in those areas, so far, in the country, has been pushing the licit agriculture.

Why is this new? Because the markets in India are being opened up to Afghan licit agriculture, as you've heard President Ghani talk about the air bridge to India and the export of agricultural products to India is a major push.

So again, we think expanded government control will equate to less poppy cultivation. And, to your point, there is still some level of government eradication. Frankly, this hasn't been -- been very successful. And again, largely because the poppy's being grown in the Taliban-controlled areas.

STAFF: Phil Stewart, Reuters.

Q: Hi, General, just a couple follow-ups. First, on the -- on the number of districts, can you give us the exact number of districts? And could you also let us know, you know, what is the Afghan casualty rate of the ANDSF this year versus last year and the size of the Afghan forces. How many have you actually -- how close to your goal of the Afghan forces are you at right now with your training and equipping?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Okay. I'll have to get back to you on the exact number of districts. Again, it's about two-thirds population control. That's the main thing we look at. We can -- we can get you the exact number of districts. But again, it's roughly the same as last year. As I said in February, in my testimony before the SASC, we're at -- we're at a stalemate.

The new U.S. South Asia policy gives us the authorities and additional capabilities we need to break that. And now, what you're seeing is the application of air power in new ways in accordance with the authorities on top of what was already a robust use of air in support of the Afghans. This, coupled with additional offensive capabilities in the Afghan army is going to enable them to go on the offensive next year and increase the population control.

And -- and by virtue of that, the terrain control. The casualties. The casualties up to August were roughly the same as previous years, but what we saw in September was a 20 percent drop in casualties. And this was primarily due to the offensive operations that the Afghan



security forces have been conducting. And so we find when they go on the offensive, their casualties go down.

And this is -- the reason we attribute this drop in casualties that occurred in the fall. Now, last year, as you looked at the casualty figures, they remain steady all the way into the fall. And this year, we did see that drop. On the size of the forces, they -- the forces are not at their -- at their full strength. We are in the process of biometrically enrolling every soldier and police official, officer in the -- in the Afghan security forces.

This process is going to be carried on and will be complete by April. And when we have completed that, we're going to have a very precise count on Afghan security forces. We do this for a couple reasons. One, primarily, is corruption. It's the way we protect American taxpayer dollars from being siphoned off through this practice of ghost soldiers.

And in keeping with this, President Ghani has also granted us authority to go into and audit, to follow U.S. dollars as they go through the ministry of finance and go through the banking system to ensure that they reach the intended person or the intended program.

This is unprecedented. This never would have happened under the previous regime, and this is something that President Ghani has allowed us to do. And we have -- we have just begun our first audit to follow the money through the system.

So the size of the forces is lower than their authorized strength, and I'd say, roughly -- we're authorized about 352,000 total. We're running around 320,000, but that's a -- that's a rough figure. And, again, as we biometrically enroll every soldier, we're going to be able to give you a much more precise answer. Over.

Q: What are -- what are your -- what are the metrics by which we should gauge your operations for next year? I mean, do you -- do you have an idea in mind about how much territory you'd like to regain, where you'd like to see Afghan casualties? As someone who's been following this war for a long time, it's hard for us to know, you know, whether this -- which way is up.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Right. So the metric that's most telling in a counterinsurgency -- this is what the Afghans are waging. We're training, advising and assisting them as they fight a counterinsurgency -- is population control. So, currently, they control about two-thirds of the population.

So we would like to see that increase to at least 80 percent. Why 80 percent? Because we think that gives them a critical mass where they control 80, the Taliban are driven to less than 10 percent of the population, maybe the rest is contested.

And this, we believe, is the critical mass necessary to drive the enemy to irrelevance, meaning they're living in these remote, outlying areas, or they reconcile, or they die, of course, is the third choice.

So, this 80 percent population control is also important for the elections coming up over the next two years. So there will be several thousand polling places -- between 7,000 and 8,000 polling places throughout the country.

So, as we go on the offensive, we expand control over the population. This means that voting can be done in a safer manner, which leads to a more credible election. Voting can be observed, because the areas are secured by the government. This leads to greater credibility.

So the -- so the expansion of control over the population, then, is key there. So that's the key factor that we're looking at. So I mentioned over the next two years. So, why two years? Because this is when we're doubling the size of the Afghan commandos. We're continuing to increase the size of their air force. Of course, they'll have U.S. combat enablers provided through the U.S. authorities. So this will help their offensive operations.

So this is -- this, we think, is going to take about two years to get to this 80 percent. Could go faster than that, but, again, I think it's -- my best military judgment right now is -- going to take a couple years to get there.

But the pressure mounting on the enemy is going to be in multiple forms, as I mentioned before. The pressure on the sanctuaries that's being delivered at the strategic level, at the national level, by President Trump and his secretaries, is, we think, going to have an affect on the enemies' ability to regenerate and fight; the military pressure on the battlefield; and then the social pressure at the ballot box.

STAFF: Courtney Kube, NBC.

Q: Hi, General. Thank you very much for doing this.

I have a couple -- one more clarification on the districts. When you talk about the districts that are controlled by the Taliban haven't -- they haven't -- that hasn't changed since about this time last year. What about the number that's contested?

There's this think tank here called Foundation for Defense of Democracies. They put out a report a month or so ago that found the number of districts that were contested by the Taliban from last year to this year had virtually tripled, to 115 to 119 districts.

Are you finding that as well? Are those numbers somewhat -- I know you said you had to come back with numbers, but have you found that the number that are contested has gone up dramatically in the past year?

GEN. NICHOLSON: There's a slight increase in contested, but then we also saw the Afghan government retake some districts as well. So I'd be happy to come back to you with specific numbers, but the contested -- that the contested district resulted from the enemy's strategy of

shifting focus away from major cities, from provincial capitals, and trying to expand into certain districts.

They ended up suffering a lot of casualties this way, because, anytime they amass to take a district center, they are at risk of U.S. airpower. So I would -- if you said the number of contested districts tripled, I would strongly disagree with that. There may have been a slight increase in districts that were contested, but not anything near doubling or tripling.

Q: One more. Actually, two more. One quick one on the air strikes that you took in the last 24 hours: Just to be clear, those are the first ones that were taken under the new authorities? Is that what you said?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Essentially, yes. But let me explain that a little bit. So the new authorities allowed me to go after revenue streams of the enemy, and so we -- taking air strikes in close support of Afghan force is a relatively straightforward affair.

You see them, you see the enemy, you make sure there's no collateral damage, and you drop the weapon. These strikes required mapping of their revenue streams and mapping of their infrastructure in areas where we had not done this before.

So when we talked about mapping for strikes, the narcotics trafficking networks in Northern Helmand, this required getting the intelligence community focused on that, so it involved hundreds of analysts kind of mapping this out over northern Helmand.

It involved ISR soaking this area for hundreds of hours to then find, pinpoint, assess the targets. There are many, many targets that have been identified. We are striking some that -- we will continue to strike these targets as we further refine them.

So this is why it takes weeks, if not months, to actually prepare to wage a campaign like this. And so this is something akin to what has been conducted against ISIS revenue streams in Syria, a similar model. And this, again, hits the enemy where it hurts, which is their financial apparatus. And then, of course, this produces great friction inside the enemy leadership as they fight over dwindling resources.

So that's why it takes some weeks or months to set up something like this. And, again, we're less than 90 days into the new -- the new U.S. policy and new authorities.

STAFF: Tara Copp, Military Times.

Q: Thank you. Hi, General.

So a couple of follow-ups on Courtney's question: Could you tell us how many facilities were hit in the operation so far? Is it a named operation? And right now, how many U.S. aircraft are involved? And can you give us a breakdown?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Yes, this -- these strikes are going on over a period of several days, so yesterday, there were two facilities struck by the Afghans and another eight struck by the -- by U.S. aircraft. We showed you the images from three of those strikes.

And then, again, these operations will continue on -- in the coming days. So I don't want to get into tactical information that might be of value to the enemy, but that's roughly the tempo we're going to maintain, going into the future.

And so, to give you a sense of scale, in Afghanistan, there's an estimated -- you know, the Drug Enforcement Agency would estimate there's anywhere between 400 and 500 drug labs active at any given time. So, last night, we took about 10 of those out -- off the battlefield in one night.

So this is the tempo we maintain. Now, of course, we're very deliberate and judicious about striking these, in order to ensure that there's no collateral damage and there's no civilian casualties. But this is going to be steady pressure that's going to stay up, and we're not going to let up.

Q: A follow-up on the -- on aircraft: What aircraft besides the B-52s and the Raptor were involved? And why would you involve an F-22? It seems a little bit, I guess, over -- just an opium production facility.

GEN. NICHOLSON: Yes. The -- this aircraft, of course, can deliver the smallest munitions that we have -- the 250-pound bomb. The B-52s deliver larger ordnance. So we're looking for a mixture of ordnance in the air over the targets so that, as we make the final decision on the use of which weapon, based on concerns about collateral damage, we needed to have a variety of airframes available with different kinds of munitions.

And so the decisions to ensure minimal collateral damage are made literally at the last minute, based on the final look of the objective, and that's why we had that airframe -- because it was capable of delivering that munition. And so that was the purpose. It wasn't because of some of the other capabilities of that aircraft.

Q: And then one, just to clear up on the authorities response you gave Courtney, that -- was this the first time you had used these expanded authorities ever, or just specific to airstrikes? Have you used the expanded authorities in other ways, in ground operations?

GEN. NICHOLSON: As you probably are aware, we've used airpower -- dropped more munitions this year than any year since 2012. And so we did this because the Afghans were on the offensive more.

And so we were able to get out there in a pre-planned manner, bringing in assets to assist, to deliver a lot of munitions. So we've -- we've been very robust in our use of airpower in support of the Afghans on the offensive this year.

Now, the aspect of the new authorities that we used in this case was the ability to strike revenue streams and support infrastructure. So their -- so it was not necessary, in terms of close support of Afghan offensive operations, to use that particular aspect of the new authorities.

But I -- but I -- but I need to say these new authorities give me the ability to go after the enemy in ways that I -- that I couldn't before. So it was -- without getting into a lengthy explanation, it does free us up now to use -- to use airpower in the most effective way, going forward.

And part of the reason it took time to do this was because, again, it opened up new target sets that we had not used ISR on, because we weren't authorized to strike them before. So this required an initial investment of ISR in order to do that.

As you know, ISR's one of the most precious commodities that the warfighter has. Our priority's been in Iraq and Syria. And, as we continue to see success there, we hope to see more assets coming over to enable -- to enable us to do more of these kinds of operations.

Q: And I'm sorry if I miscommunicated my question, but is this the example of the new authorities being used for the first time ever, or have they been used in other instances that didn't involve an airstrike?

GEN. NICHOLSON: I'd say this would be the -- this would be the first significant use of the new authorities. That would be a good way to put it.

STAFF: Tom Watkins, AFP.

Q: Okay. Well, thanks for doing this.

Just going back to -- I think it was still earlier, you mentioned the 20 percent decrease in ANDSF casualties in September. It's a little bit hard for us to -- when you -- when you tout figures like that, it's hard for us to put it in a correct context, now that we're no longer getting the actual releases from the -- from the Afghans themselves.

The -- I guess this is more of an observation. But is there any way you can, you know, encourage your Afghan colleagues to kind of be more accountable, as they had been before? You know, when things are going well, then you want to tout a figure; when not, then apparently not. So is there any pressure you can put on them?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Well I appreciate your comment. And this was a request from the Afghan government. It has generated a dialogue about our policy on this. I think I -- I'd go back to President Trump's comment in his remarks on the 21st of August, because we don't want to provide information to the enemy that's of value to them.

I think this is in the -- in the spirit of that. It has to do with the request that we got from our

Afghan partners. Let me put it this way. The Afghans are fighting very hard. They've taken -- they've taken a tough fight to the enemy. The enemy casualties are greater.

We are trying not -- we won't get into body counts. And -- we all -- we all know the history of those, and how those are not an effective way of communicating what's going on the battlefield. I understand your request, however, and thank you for sharing that.

We completely understand the need to be able to measure the progress in the campaign. You know, we're going to -- we're going to work hard to give you those kind of metrics.

You know, I talked about population control. Another one would be levels of violence, as we see levels of violence come down we think that's going to be an important measure going into the future. So I take your point, I understand it and we'll keep working this.

Q: Thank you. And then just a second point. I'm sorry. I know there's lots of other people who need questions. But just putting your NATO hat on for a moment, after the ministerial a week and a half ago, did you get any additional commitment from any NATO members? Because they'll -- there was a shortfall in terms of troop pledges. Has any of that been made up, subsequent to the meeting?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Right. So I was very encouraged at that -- the NATO ministerials, that we had two dozen nations talk about increasing their -- their troop presence in Afghanistan. So this is very encouraging.

Having said that, as you know, we're measuring that against a combined joint statement of requirements. Each nation has its own individual decision-making cycle, which, having been on my fourth assignment in NATO as a general, I can tell you we just need to let these play out.

I'm very encouraged by the strong show of support that we heard at those defense ministerials. I mean, the two dozen nations talking about potential increases is just one way of illustrating that. But, almost to a minister, we heard very strong shows of support for the mission.

So, as the commander, number one, I'm concerned about international will and international will to succeed. And in this -- you know, war is a contest of wills. And, from 2011 to 2016, we telegraphed to the enemy that we were leaving. We drew down our forces steadily -- I'd say too far and too fast. And so the enemy believed that, in this contest of wills, we had lost our will.

And what came across to me loud and clear in that defense ministerial was we now have the will to succeed. And so this is crucial. It's an intangible -- okay, we can talk about the specific troop numbers, but I'm above 93 percent of the requirement.

Again, looking forward to the -- as the political processes play out in each of the respective capitals, I expect we're going to get more. So to me, it was a very encouraging outcome.

STAFF: Last question, Ryan Browne.

Q: General, thank you for that.

Just to follow really quickly on Thomas's question, on the additional NATO troops, are you looking for any of the allies, specifically Germany and Italy, who control -- or who advises the west and the north, to also give their troops the authority to advise closer to the battlefield, the Kandak level?

Are you -- is that something you want the allies to also do, or is it only U.S. advisers going to be the ones closer to the battlefield, helping call in airstrikes, helping provide the support?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Yes, so under -- we're examining right now the authorities and the NATO SOFA and working through the implications of your question. First off, training, advising and assisting below the corps level has been embraced in principle by NATO. And this was in guidance -- this was back in 2016.

And so this led to the creation of brigade-level advising teams. And, in fact, the Germans created a brigade-level advising team that goes in an expeditionary manner to Kunduz to advise the 20th Division. We've employed U.S. brigade-level advising teams in the west. And then there have been elements of Italian leadership, of course, supervising those efforts. So we'll continue to work closely with our allies on that.

Next week, when I meet with you all, I'll talk about the S-FAB, the Security Force Assistance Brigade, which will be deployed in time for spring offensive operations. And then -- and then I can get into this question in a little greater detail. But the allies are making extremely important contributions in ways that they can, within the NATO SOFA and within the intent of the NATO O-PLAN.

In particular, I've asked for their help in the schools of the Afghan training and education base. There's 13 schools; 11 of them, now, are being filled by allies who will be coming in and helping with the training and education.

The other dimension to this, which is important to understand -- that, under the U.S. bilateral security agreement, we are unique in having authorities to do certain things in the country that our allies are not.

And so there is -- there is a difference between the NATO SOFA and the bilateral security agreement that enables us to do some of the things in terms of combat enabling that we do at the lower levels. And then much of this has been done in the past, as part of our special forces advising. And now, with the new South Asia policy, that will be extended out to the conventional ANDSF. But, again, it's U.S. forces that have those unique authorities under the bilateral security agreement.

Sorry for the complicated answer. But there's many -- there's many dimensions to this. And, again, I come back to the will demonstrated by our allies. Around 7,500 coalition forces on the ground alongside their American partners -- and that's a strong show of support by the 39 nations in the coalition.

STAFF: All right. So, unfortunately, we're out of time. General Nicholson will be back next week. Sir, thank you very much for your time. I know you've had a very long day. Do you have any closing words for the group?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Well, I wanted to say thanks to all of you. I know maybe half of the group has been out to Afghanistan recently. We really look forward to seeing any of you, all of you -- come on out and see us, so you can see for yourselves on the ground the improvements that are happening in the Afghan army, the Afghan police, the growth of the special forces, the air force.

And again, I want to thank -- so thank you for telling the story. Thanks -- you know, thanks for your interest in it. I do think the next two years are going to be significant in terms of where we're going, and I look forward to seeing you all when you get a chance to get over here, and of course seeing some of you next week, as well.

Thank you very much.

STAFF: Thank you very much.

Ladies and gentlemen, the videos from today's briefing will be up on DVIDS shortly. Thank you.