

Obama launches Afghanistan surge

Amanda Hodge, The Australian, February 19, 2009

US President Barack Obama will send 17,000 troops to Afghanistan in time for the Taliban's traditional spring offensive, as he launches an Iraq-style surge aimed at reversing the flagging fortunes of coalition forces battling militants there.

Announcing the surge yesterday, Mr Obama said the increase was necessary to "stabilise a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which has not received the strategic attention, direction and resources it urgently requires".

"The Taliban is resurgent in Afghanistan, and al-Qa'ida supports the insurgency and threatens America from its safe haven along the Pakistani border," he said.

He recognised "the extraordinary strain this deployment places on our troops and military families", but the deteriorating security situation in the region required "urgent attention and swift action".

Last year was the deadliest for ordinary Afghans caught up in the fighting, the UN reported this week, with a 39 per cent increase in civilian deaths. Militants were to blame for 55 per cent of the 2118 civilian fatalities, while UN, NATO and Afghan forces accounted for 39 per cent, it found.

In Mr Obama's first significant troop deployment, one army and one marine brigade originally scheduled to go to Iraq will be sent to Afghanistan at the request of Defence Secretary Robert Gates.

US officials said yesterday an additional 8000 marines would be on the ground by late April -- when the warmer weather heralded an escalation in fighting.

An army brigade of 4000 soldiers would follow in the northern summer, along with an extra 5000 support troops. The additional troops will be stationed in southern Afghanistan, where the fighting has been heaviest.

The decision comes ahead of a review of US strategic policy in Afghanistan, which is expected to recommend that troop numbers on the ground be increased to 60,000 from the

current estimated 38,000 troops fighting militant extremists in the south Asian nation.

A review of US military operations in Iraq, due in the next few weeks, is expected to recommend a corresponding drawdown of troops there as Mr Obama moves to fulfil his election promise to withdraw troops from Iraq within 16 months of taking office.

Mr Obama said the Iraq drawdown gave his administration the "flexibility to increase our presence in Afghanistan", adding the immediate troop surge announced yesterday did not preclude sending more forces.

Military force alone could not stop the spread of extremism in Afghanistan and his administration would develop a more comprehensive diplomatic approach to Afghanistan, he said.

Despite leaving the door open to negotiations with more moderate Taliban forces in Afghanistan, the US has taken a hard line against a peace deal struck this week between the Pakistan Government and extremists in the Swat Valley to allow Sharia law there.

Mr Obama is yet to comment on the agreement, which has prompted local Taliban-linked militants to call a temporary ceasefire to months of bloody fighting in the Swat, but US and NATO officials have described the deal as a "negative development".

More than 1000 civilians have been killed and as many as 500,000 displaced in a vicious campaign waged by militants loyal to radical cleric Maulana Fazlullah for the imposition of a draconian Islamic legal code in the former tourist mecca.

The US argues that such peace deals allow militants to regroup and strengthen.

Analysts have also warned that the agreement would encourage militants across Pakistan's now-vulnerable North Western Frontier Province to demand similar concessions.

Taliban and al-Qa'ida militants already control Pakistan's lawless Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which neighbour

Afghanistan and serve as a base for launching

cross-border attacks on US and NATO forces.