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New U.S. troops set to fight Taliban around Kabul

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By Jonathon Burch

BAGRAM, Afghanistan, Jan 28 (Reuters) - Some 3,000 new U.S. soldiers have set up bases near the Afghan capital, Kabul, to begin flushing out Taliban in an area which has so far seen little military presence, the U.S. army said on Wednesday.

Around 3,500 soldiers started arriving in Afghanistan this month in the first phase of a troop increase that will almost double the U.S. military presence in the war-torn country, currently at about 35,000.

The majority of the new brigade from the 10th Mountain Division -- around 3,000 soldiers -- are now stationed in bases in Maidan Wardak and Logar provinces to the south of Kabul.

The remainder have been sent to Kunar province in the northeast on the Pakistani border.

"We're expecting a spike in violence upon our arrival. There haven't been any U.S. forces in this area, so the insurgents have pretty much had free rein," said Lieutenant Colonel Steven Osterholzer, spokesman for the brigade.

"Us just physically being in this region is going to increase troops in contact and probably IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices)."

Violent conflict surged in Afghanistan last year with some 5,000 people killed and with more attacks around Kabul, ordinary Afghans fear insurgents are slowly encircling the capital.

"We know there are Taliban forces operating in those areas. We plan on being aggressive. We want to identify the sanctuaries and deny them access and the freedom of movement," said Osterholzer.

A major problem facing international troops in Afghanistan, military leaders say, is that there are not enough of them to be able to effectively hold areas wrested from Taliban control.

U.S. and NATO forces in the country total about 65,000.

"We've had forces in the past who have gone through a valley and have pushed them out. But they moved on and the insurgents have moved back in. That's one of the reasons why we're being brought in," said Osterholzer.

One of the first tasks the new brigade will carry out is to secure the main highway running through Maidan Wardak to Kabul. (Reporting by Jonathon Burch; Editing by Richard Meares)

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