AFGHANISTAN, 8 April 2010 (Agence France Presse) - The US military is poised to contain the scourge of homemade bombs in Afghanistan, despite a spike in casualties from the explosives last year among NATO-led troops, a US general said Thursday.

Casualties caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) doubled last year among coalition forces, as did the number of incidents involving the roadside bombs, Lieutenant General Michael Oates told reporters. The explosives killed 322 coalition soldiers in the Afghan war last year and wounded 1,813, compared to 183 killed in 2008 and 790 wounded, according to Pentagon figures. Incidents with homemade bombs, ranging from attacks to the discovery of unexploded devices, also "nearly doubled" last year, Oates said. But he said a combination of surveillance drones, specially-designed armored vehicles, a US troop buildup and tips from ordinary Afghans would begin to defuse the problem. "I actually see the situation getting better for us every month over there," said Oates, who leads the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization. "The enemy, the Taliban is not going to give up easily. But I think they'll hit their high watermark here directly."

Oates said he expected more casualties as coalition troops seek to clear roads of IEDs but not at the same rate as last year. "All the ingredients we need to improve our counter-IED fight are either on the way or currently present, and my professional judgement is that we will do much better this year than we did last year," he said. Three years ago, US forces faced a more dire threat in Iraq from IEDs but managed to eventually contain the problem. Tactics and lessons from that effort were now being applied to Afghanistan, the general said. The Pentagon is scrambling to deploy specialists and to deliver more unmanned surveillance aircraft and armored vehicles custom-made for the Afghan terrain, which commanders in the field have requested to counter IEDs.

"We're rushing in a significant amount of surveillance capability into the theater," Oates said, to allow "persistent surveillance on the road networks." The push for resources came after Defense Secretary Robert Gates named a special task force to ensure a more coordinated response to the IED threat. The deliveries were "going as fast as humanly possible," and required building more runways to accommodate more manned and unmanned surveillance planes, Oates said. The military is also working to improve equipment to detect the crude but deadly roadside bombs. The bombs -- mostly made from fertilizer, fuel and metal -- are exacting a high price from the world's most sophisticated armies and are the Taliban's weapon of choice. IEDs are the number one killer of NATO-led troops and are blamed for up to 90 percent of US casualties. This year, 21 US soldiers were killed by IEDs in January, 14 in February and 16 in March, according to Pentagon figures. Among non-US international coalition troops, homemade bombs killed 10 soldiers in January, 15 in February and five in March.

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