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Afghan police units tangled in criminal activity

A U.S.-backed program to recruit police has failed to significantly stem the insurgency, with some units becoming deeply entangled in criminal activity, including bribe-taking and extortion, a Pentagon-funded study finds.

By David S. Cloud and Laura King, Los Angeles Times

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WASHINGTON — A U.S.-backed program to recruit police in rural Afghanistan has failed to significantly stem the insurgency, with some units becoming deeply entangled in criminal activity, including bribe-taking and extortion, according to a Pentagon-funded study.

The 13,000-member Afghan Local Police has been hailed by U.S. commanders as a vital, homegrown defense force in areas where the Taliban-led insurgency is strongest. But the unpublished study obtained by The Times contradicts official U.S. claims that the police are driving down attacks.

U.S. officials plan to increase the force to more than 30,000 as American troops withdraw by the end of 2014.

The study, based on classified data and produced for the U.S. special operations command in Afghanistan, presents a much less positive picture.

It found that one in five U.S. special operations teams advising the local police units complained that they had committed violence or otherwise abused civilians. In recent months, some U.S. troops accused the Afghan police of drug abuse, bribe-taking, rape and drug-trafficking.

Afghan officials, interviewed separately, described the local forces as poorly led, allowing them to engage in extortion and petty harassment of villagers. Sometimes the offenses are more serious, such as land seizures, physical assaults and running private jails, with police demanding a role in local financial transactions.

The study says violence initially increases after U.S. special forces go into an area to root out insurgents. After the Americans withdraw and leave behind a police unit, violence usually drops back to the level before the U.S. teams first intervened, the study found.

As a result, insurgent activity in most of the 78 areas patrolled by the local police is not significantly different than in areas without the units, the report concludes. The force is mostly deployed in villages in Afghanistan's east and south.

"Violence returns to [previous] levels after 15 months and levels comparable to other areas after 21 months," according to the study, which was produced by Rand Corp., a policy research organization based in Santa Monica that tracks the Afghan police program for the special operations command.

The study examined attacks over the last 18 months, a period that has seen violence drop across Afghanistan. It was based on the U.S. military's classified database of "Significant Activity Reports," which includes known attacks on NATO forces, Afghan security forces, civilians and infrastructure.

In public, the Pentagon has portrayed the Afghan police force as a success. In a report to Congress earlier this month on the progress in the war, the Pentagon asserted that "overall security has improved in most villages" where the police units patrol and that violence "gradually drops" after 15 to 18 months.

The benefits and risks of quickly creating small local defense units are a subject of intense debate in the U.S. and Afghan governments. Both are looking for ways to lock in security gains as U.S. and other NATO troops withdraw combat forces over the next 21/2 years.

Army Gen. David Petraeus, who is now the director of the CIA, proposed creating the Afghan Local Police in 2010 when he commanded the war in Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai initially resisted, concerned that some Afghan officials would try to use the units as independent militias.

Petraeus eventually won Karzai's support by promising that the Ministry of Interior, which the central government controls, would pay and oversee the force.

But in some areas, Afghan officials say, the local police are under control of political power brokers and are fueling criminal activity and violence.

In parts of Helmand province, local police "are taking the law into their own hands, beating people and taking money," said Sami Sadaat, a security expert who is a former policy advisor to

the Interior Ministry. "Yes, they helped remove the Taliban. But, in a way, they replaced them."

Interneine fighting is common, sometimes over personal grudges and sometimes at the apparent behest of the insurgents.

In late March, a member of the police in Paktika province, near the border with Pakistan, killed nine of his comrades-in-arms, first slipping sleeping drugs in their tea, then slaughtering them after they passed out.

The program "isn't good for the people or the country," said Nezamuddin Nasher, chief of Khanabad district in Kunduz province. "They have lots of tensions among themselves, sometimes resulting in murders."

He cited a recent clash between two Afghan Local Police commanders in Kunduz, in which five people were killed.

"If someone wants to sell a piece of land, members of the [police] want their cut," he said. "They also demand '*ushur*' [a share of the harvest] from every single family, and tell people it is a kind of tax. This is what ordinary people face from them every day."

U.S. officials say police recruits are vetted by local tribal councils and by the Afghan government. But in some villages, former Taliban fighters who switch sides and join the government's 'reintegration' program are funneled into the local police — a revolving-door syndrome that leaves many villagers fearful.

Afghanistan's army and national police is supposed to reach 352,000 personnel this year, but even that force cannot cover remote areas where the Taliban is strongest. The local police are supposed to help fill the gap.

U.S. officials say the local police have repeatedly proved willing to fight insurgents, despite having only rudimentary training and small arms.

Col. John Evans, a special operations officer responsible for training the local police, told reporters in Kabul last week that in four out of five incidents where the units have exchanged fire with insurgents, they have fought back effectively.

"In some areas, they've been a very positive influence, removing insurgents and bringing security. Now these areas are more secure, and people feel safer," said Shukria Paikan Ahmadi, a Afghan parliamentarian from Kunduz.

However, she added that in other areas the local police are "a bigger problem than the Taliban."