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Attacks on Afghan Troops by Colleagues Are Rising, Allies Say

By Graham Bowley and Richard A. Oppel Jr.

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KABUL - Even as attacks by Afghan security forces on NATO troops have become an increasing source of tension, new NATO data shows another sign of vulnerability for the training mission: even greater numbers of the Afghan police and military forces have killed each other this year.

So far, Afghan soldiers or police officers have killed 53 of their comrades and wounded at least 22 others in 35 separate attacks this year, according to NATO data provided to The New York Times by officials in Kabul. By comparison, at least 40 NATO service members were reported killed by Afghan security forces or others working with them.

Both figures fall under what officials call insider attacks, and both numbers have climbed sharply over the past two years, Western officials say. But while officials say that a vast majority of attacks on Western forces are born out of outrage or personal disputes, the Afghan-on-Afghan numbers are said in larger part to reflect a greater vulnerability to infiltration by the Taliban.

Further, there are concerns about cultural clashes within the rapidly expanding Afghan forces themselves, Afghan and NATO officials say, raising questions about their ability to weather the country's deep factional differences after the NATO troop withdrawal in 2014.

"Three decades of war can play a pivotal role in the internal causes," said Maj. Bashir Ishaqzia, commander of the Afghan National Police recruitment center in Nangarhar Province. He said

one of the biggest challenges for the army and police forces was a lasting “culture of intolerance among Afghans, as well as old family, tribal, ethnic, factional, lingual and personal disputes.”

Afghan and American officials said Thursday that some explanations for the rising number of Afghan-on-Afghan attacks were intuitive: there are about three times as many Afghan security force members as there are NATO and American troops, and only a portion of the Afghan forces regularly work side by side with Western troops. So insider attacks figure as a lower percentage of killings within the Afghan forces, or so-called green-on-green attacks, than they do in Afghan-on-Western violence, known as green-on-blue attacks.

Still, officials noted a growing concern about the issue. In a news conference on Thursday addressing Afghan attacks on Western forces, Gen. John R. Allen, the commander of American and NATO troops, confirmed that Afghan-on-Afghan attacks were seen as an intensifying problem.

“Indeed, the Afghan casualties are higher than ours in this regard,” he said, speaking to Pentagon reporters by satellite from Kabul.

In the briefing, General Allen provided a new perspective on the insider killings of NATO troops. Previously, military officials had said that Taliban infiltration or impersonation of Afghan security members could be blamed for only about 10 percent of such attacks. In addition, the general noted that, roughly, 15 percent of attacks might be caused by Taliban coercion of soldiers or police officers, either directly or through family members.

Taliban influence and outright infiltration is thought to play an even larger role in Afghan-on-Afghan violence, Afghan officials said.

One reason Afghan forces are more at risk of infiltration is that they typically live in compounds without anything near the protection found at bases with American troops, said Gen. Aminullah Amar Khail, former commander of the border police in eastern Afghanistan.

“The enemy would prefer to focus full attention on targeting American and coalition forces,” General Khail said. “But normally they do not have easy access to foreign soldiers.” He said green-on-blue episodes tend to happen only at training centers and joint Afghan-NATO bases and outposts, while green-on-green attacks “have happened everywhere.”

“Infiltrators have easy access to the Afghan police and soldiers,” he said.

He said one point of vulnerability is that Afghan forces sleep together well away from American troops and their upgraded security, making it easier for an impostor to kill Afghans as they doze.

That was the apparent plan in Oruzgan Province this spring when an Afghan policeman on late-night guard duty at a checkpoint allowed Taliban fighters to enter and kill nine other officers in their beds. The Afghan Interior Ministry said evidence indicated the guard was a Taliban infiltrator.

Afghan and American officials have expressed increased urgency about improving the vetting of new army and police recruits — a critical issue as those forces rapidly expand and work alongside Western trainers. Still, General Allen noted that the international coalition remained committed to the strategy of working directly with the Afghans as trainers as those forces assume greater responsibility for security.

“At this particular moment, I don’t believe that we need to contemplate reducing our contact with the Afghans,” he said. “The closer the relationship with them — indeed the more we can foster a relationship of brotherhood — the more secure we are.”

Still, the vulnerabilities brought by a huge number of new recruits are particularly acute for the Afghan forces themselves — particularly within the Afghan Local Police program, in which irregular local militias are armed and trained by American Special Operations forces.

One brutal case involving police-on-police violence occurred in the eastern province of Paktika in March. In that attack, a member of the Afghan Local Police crushed sleeping pills in his colleagues’s food at a command post, Afghan officials say. While they slept, he shot nine of them to death and escaped in a pickup truck with most of their weapons.

As with most public reports of insider killings, the Taliban claimed that the killer had been working on their behalf after infiltrating the Local Police. But Afghan officials said it was unclear whether that was the case or whether the motive was greed or a personal vendetta.

Afghan military officials pointed out that it would be almost impossible for an infiltrator to carry out the same kind of poisoning plot against NATO forces, where food preparation is centralized. Many Afghan security members, on the other hand, prepare their own food, offering an attacker an inviting opportunity.

On Wednesday, President Hamid Karzai’s office asserted that many of the infiltration cases were engineered by foreign spies, with the strong implication that Pakistan or Iran could be involved. But NATO officials said they had not been given evidence of that; in his news conference on Thursday, General Allen said, “I’m looking forward to Afghanistan providing us with the intelligence that permits them to come to that conclusion.”

Another factor in insider killings is more direct, officials say: young armed men can lose control when they are brought together under pressure, and often with significant background or cultural differences.

“The gun culture that exists here after decades of war, and the sense of honor among young Afghan men, occasionally mixes with deadly results,” said Col. Thomas Collins, a NATO military spokesman in Kabul. Some of the green-on-green episodes he said he had reviewed “came down to two young men in an argument, men with guns that took it to the next level.”

Major Ishaqzia, the police recruiting commander in Nangarhar, said, “Sometimes verbal disputes or disagreement over the ways of doing things among policemen, or taunting and mocking types of behaviors, lead to fighting and the use of firearms.”

