

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

The Washington Post

Training suspended for new Afghan recruits

By Greg Jaffe and Kevin Sieff

09/01/2012

The senior commander for Special Operations forces in Afghanistan has suspended training for all new Afghan recruits until the more than 27,000 Afghan troops working with his command can be re-vetted for ties to the insurgency.

The move comes as NATO officials struggle to stem the tide of attacks on NATO forces by their Afghan colleagues. The attacks, which have killed 45 troops this year, have forced NATO officials to acknowledge a painful truth: Many of the incidents might have been prevented if existing security measures had been applied correctly.

But numerous military guidelines were not followed — by Afghans or Americans — because of concerns that they might slow the growth of the Afghan army and police, according to NATO officials.

Special Operations officials said that the current process for vetting recruits is effective but that a lack of follow-up has allowed Afghan troops who fell under the sway of the insurgency or grew disillusioned with the Afghan government to remain in the force.

“We have a very good vetting process,” a senior Special Operations official said. “What we learned is that you just can’t take it for granted. We probably should have had a mechanism to follow up with recruits from the beginning.”

In other instances, the vetting process for Afghan soldiers and police was never properly implemented, and NATO officials say they knew it. But they looked the other way, worried that extensive background checks could hinder the recruitment process. Also ignored were requirements that Afghans display proper credentials while on base.

“Everyone admits there was a lot of international pressure to grow these forces, and the vetting of these individuals was cast aside as an inhibitor,” said a U.S. official who, like other officials, spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about the issue.

The move last week by the Special Operations Command to suspend the training of new recruits followed the Aug. 17 shooting of two American Special Forces members by a new Afghan Local Police recruit at a small outpost in western Afghanistan.

The local police initiative places Special Forces teams in remote villages where they work with Afghan elders and government officials to help villagers defend themselves against insurgent attacks and intimidation. U.S. officials have touted the program, which numbers about 16,000 Afghans, as a critical way to spread security and the influence of the Afghan government to remote areas of the country where the Taliban have found haven.

But the program, which is slated to double in size to about 30,000 Afghans, also carries risks for U.S. troops. “We’re living with the Afghans,” said a second senior Special Operations official. “We can’t afford to take any chances with vetting.”

Since the program began in 2010, there have been three instances of Afghan Local Police recruits turning their guns on their American counterparts.

Afghan officials, working with U.S. Special Operations troops, have re-vetted about 1,100 Afghan Local Police officers and removed five policemen from the program. They are also in the process of vetting 8,000 Afghan commandos and 3,000 Afghan army special forces soldiers who are fighting alongside American Special Operations troops throughout the country. Special Operations officials said that they anticipate it will take about two months to rescreen all of the Afghan forces and that the training of new recruits could stall for as long as a month.

NATO officials have declined to provide many details of their investigations into the insider killing incidents, and they have not said whether any commanders have been reprimanded for failing to follow security measures. Although NATO officials concede that force-protection guidelines were routinely ignored, they have not said whether commanders had the authority to waive them.

Measures specifically designed to curtail attacks were also inconsistently applied, officials say. The “Guardian Angel” program — which requires a service member to shoot any Afghan soldier or police officer who tries to attack coalition troops — was often seen as a distraction from NATO’s mission. Calls to minimize off-duty time spent with Afghan troops were similarly thought to undermine the goal of relationship-building, according to NATO officials.

With insider attacks responsible for nearly 15 percent of this year's coalition fatalities, top NATO leaders have asked commanders across the country to suggest a series of fresh security measures, part of a newly established Insider Threat Working Group. They have also mandated proper implementation of existing measures, some of them in place for a decade.

"It's time to retrospectively shore up the system," said a senior NATO official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Less downtime together

Officials acknowledge that the character of NATO-Afghan relations varies across the country and that it was always far-fetched to think that a single set of precautions could be universally applied. But the laxity that was for years the norm is no longer acceptable, they say.

Troops are now being advised to stay away from Afghan soldiers and police officers during vulnerable moments, such as when they are sleeping, bathing or exercising, according to a directive from NATO leaders.

"We need to reduce risks by reducing certain interactions with the Afghans. We don't need to sleep or shower next to them, because that's when we're most vulnerable," said a NATO official who has been charged with making security recommendations. "It's about force protection without endangering the relationship. It's a true teeter-totter."

The balance is particularly difficult to strike at this late stage of the war, when training and advising Afghan forces is essential to the U.S. effort. Such work necessitates close collaboration. Particularly on smaller bases, Afghan and American forces live in tight proximity and go on daily joint operations.

The slogan for the U.S.-Afghan military partnership, printed on billboards and in pamphlets, is "Shohna ba Shohna" — shoulder to shoulder.

NATO leaders say they have no plans to distance themselves from their partners. But inevitably, aspects of the relationship are being called into question.

"We remain convinced that the closer our relationship with the Afghans, the more secure we are. But there's no question we must work together to understand and reduce the insider threat," said Maj. Lori Hodge, a spokeswoman for NATO forces. "We're examining every aspect of the relationship to ensure our interaction makes sense, not just culturally but in terms of force protection, as well."

The most recent insider attack occurred Wednesday night. Three Australian troops were relaxing at their base in southern Uruzgan province when they were shot at close range by a man wearing an Afghan army uniform, the vice chief of Australia's defense force, Mark Binskin, told reporters in Sydney.

Accepting a flawed system

For a decade, coalition officials watched as Afghan security services overlooked key elements of the vetting process — sometimes for the sake of expediency and sometimes because of corruption.

Many Afghans, even those who were vetted, were never issued official badges, making it impossible to tell who was supposed to have access to any particular facility. In Helmand province, thousands of Afghan police officers lack identification cards, according to U.S. officials.

“For years, there have been thousands of guys without proper identification. Our troops had no way of knowing who they were, or if they picked up their uniform in a bazaar,” said a U.S. official, one of several charged with making recommendations on ways to reduce the number of insider attacks.

An acceptance of that flawed system meant that Western troops rarely questioned Afghans on base who lacked credentials. The 15-year-old civilian who shot three Marines in Helmand last month had lived on a U.S. base for weeks, despite not being a member of the security forces.

“They made a fatal assumption that he was part of the staff,” said a U.S. official familiar with the incident. “They didn’t require the district police chief to prove that he belonged there. They didn’t want to push. They wanted to build a relationship.”

“Now there is a real effort to make sure people are adhering to orders they are supposed to be adhering to,” the U.S. official said. “We don’t need a lot of new laws, we just need to make sure people follow the ones that are already out there.”

One official tasked with making recommendations for new measures has suggested the establishment of Task Force Insider Threat — an amalgam of law enforcement and counterterrorism experts that would be embedded within units across Afghanistan, working full time to detect and analyze potential threats. Senior NATO officials in Kabul confirmed that the plan is under consideration.

The Afghan army has announced plans to launch an expanded counterintelligence campaign against infiltrators. Last month, NATO forces launched an independent counterintelligence effort that Western officials confirmed but would not discuss in detail.