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## Afghan and American Culture Clashes, at Center Stage

By Rod Nordland

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It was billed as a press briefing by American and Afghan commanders on what the allies are doing to stop insider attacks by Afghan forces against NATO troops. The first question, though, was just about the last thing the three generals on the dais wanted to hear.

An Afghan journalist, Azizullah Foroghi, complained that an American soldier had pointed a weapon at him while he was setting up his camera. "I believe if that had happened to an Afghan soldier instead of me, he would have reacted to it," Mr. Foroghi said, in Dari.

Mr. Foroghi, who works for Noorin TV, was clearly referring to the sort of insider attacks, known here as green-on-blue attacks, in which Afghan security forces have killed 15 American and other foreign soldiers in the past month, prompting the United States military to shut down some training programs run by Special Operations troops late last month.

The generals did not all immediately get the reference, however, since the official interpreter gave a much-softened version of Mr. Foroghi's complaint, leaving out the accusation about the gun-pointing.

The mood, however, was clear enough when several other Afghans complained that they have been treated much worse when going through security at ISAF headquarters than their American colleagues have been. Some American journalists contested their point, insisting that the security treatment was evenhandedly annoying.

“That didn’t start very well,” Lt. Gen. Adrian Bradshaw was overhead saying to aides afterward. The British officer, who is deputy commander of the International Security Assistance Force, as the NATO-led military coalition is known, was clearly not well pleased.

General Bradshaw announced that the allies had agreed on joint counterintelligence teams, as well as joint post-attack assessments, and “direct input from Afghan Army religious and cultural affairs advisers” to improve cultural sensitivity. Insider attacks, which have claimed 45 lives this year, have more than doubled over the same period in 2011 — increasing rapidly after the burnings of Korans by American soldiers in February.

General Bradshaw reiterated the coalition’s findings that most insider attacks were the result of personal disputes arising from misunderstandings between soldiers, but that only about a fourth could be attributed to insurgent activity.

In a statement issued later, the ISAF commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Allen, said that “my entire command is absolutely driven to do everything we can to reduce this threat.”

“It is a threat to both green and blue that requires a green and blue solution,” he added.

Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi, the spokesman for the Afghan military, who was also at the briefing, said that a thorough revetting of Afghan National Army troops and recruits was being stepped up and that already “hundreds” of A.N.A. soldiers had either been detained or dismissed from duty because of suspicions about their identity documents or other irregularities. He said he was unable to give a more precise number, but suggested that he would do so in the future.

General Azimi said his own soldiers would also get increased cultural sensitivity training, and waved a booklet that he said was being distributed to the A.N.A. in an effort to persuade Afghans to be understanding about foreigners’ peculiarities.

Titled “A Brochure for Comprehending the Cultures of the Coalition Forces,” the 28-page leaflet noted that 5,000 copies had been printed. Although the Afghan Army has 195,000 soldiers now, most are illiterate.

The brochure warned that coalition soldiers considered it normal to share pictures of their wives and daughters with friends and comrades, while Afghans would consider it taboo to show off their female relatives. Coalition soldiers might well walk in front of someone who was praying without realizing it, or put their feet up on a table or desk and point them at people in the room — all acts that are not intended as the insult they seem, the booklet said.

“As you know, Afghans in the presence of others do not blow their noses,” the brochure warned. “This practice is very common in the culture of coalition countries. If a member of the coalition forces blows his nose in your presence, please don’t consider this an offense or an insult.”

Strangely missing from the gently worded document, however, is discussion of the sort of hot-button issues detailed in a classified military report on attitudes of Afghan and American soldiers toward one another that underlay the insider attacks.

The report, written last year by a social scientist and at the time criticized and suppressed by military commanders, said that Afghans were particularly offended by American soldiers' attitudes toward women, their toilet practices and frequent profanity.

One thing Afghans find particularly distressing is having guns pointed at them, said Qais Azimy, a senior producer for Al Jazeera here. "I've had guns pointed at me at press conferences, even with bullets put in," he said. "It is very offensive culturally, it's the same as killing, even in our law."

As for Mr. Foroghi's complaint on Thursday, however, his own Afghan colleagues were doubtful that the cameraman had been ill treated. Three of those who were near him in the crowded briefing room said they had seen him jostling for position with an American Army sergeant, a camerawoman for the military. In the jostling, they said, he became inappropriately close to the woman — another taboo in Afghan culture.

"The fault was ours, not the female camerawoman's," said Mohammad Mansoryan, a cameraman for Noor TV.

"The whole argument was over the camera, where to place it, and she was telling me to keep it away from her camera," Mr. Foroghi objected, saying he did not get too close to her. "I am not a person who would do such a disgraceful act."

The camerawoman herself was apparently more worried about her weapon than any possible sexual harassment, according to an account provided by ISAF director of public affairs, Col. Thomas Collins, who insisted that no one had ever pointed a gun at the Afghan journalist. "The guy kept bumping into her and she said, 'Watch it, the gun is loaded,' " he said, adding that she un-shouldered it to keep it out of reach. "Somehow he took offense and said she pointed it at him, and I don't know where that came from," Colonel Collins said.

After the increase in insider attacks, all American military personnel are required to carry loaded weapons whenever around Afghans.

There were also a number of "guardian angels" at the press briefing. That is the term the military has given to soldiers who are now required to monitor gatherings where American soldiers and Afghans mix, and in case of an attack are authorized to shoot to kill.