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The New York Times

25 Afghan Police May Have Joined Taliban

By Rod Nordland

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A group of about two dozen Afghan national police officers may have defected to the Taliban, according to American and Afghan officers here in Wardak Province.

The police officers left their posts in the remote Chak District of Wardak just before midnight Wednesday, and on Thursday morning a Taliban spokesman claimed they had surrendered to them.

“They left with all their weapons, two trucks and machine guns and heavy weapons,” said Maj. Abdul Khalil, the police chief in Jalrez District, just north of Chak.

Major Khalil said there had been a dispute about pay. “We don’t know if they have gone over to the Taliban, or they just ran away, or what has happened,” Major Khalil said. “We’re concerned, though, because they took heavy weapons.”

At about the same time Major Khalil was speaking, a Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, said in a telephone interview that 24 policemen in Chak had surrendered to the Taliban along with their weapons and two trucks.

“They are safe now and will not be harmed and will be treated well under our code of conduct,” Mr. Mujahid said.

The American Army battalion commander in charge of training the police in Wardak, Lt. Col. David Sink, said he had been informed about the policemen's disappearance by the Afghan national police but had no further details.

The spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Interior, Zemaray Bashary, said that it was still unclear whether it was an "inside plot by one of those soldiers, or they were ambushed and captured."

Advisers for NATO have been trying to curtail the corruption often occurring in remote outposts of Afghan police by developing a program that would pay policemen directly by text message — thereby circumventing the paymasters who might be tempted while distributing the cash themselves.

In an unrelated episode on Thursday, seven policemen, believed to be Afghan, were killed and two wounded in a NATO airstrike during a joint patrol in eastern Kunduz Province, Mr. Bashary said. The international forces confirmed in an e-mailed statement that "several" policemen had been reported killed and wounded in the airstrike.

Gunmen in the village of Qurghan Tepa in Imam Sahib district and opened small-arms fire on the Afghan and international soldiers. An airstrike was ordered, and a single bomb destroyed a police truck as it was approaching the military units, only about 200 yards away.

In the Chak area where the policemen disappeared, there are no American or other NATO forces, although there are Afghan police and soldiers. Taliban fighters are active there and in much of Wardak Province, in central Afghanistan, just west of Kabul Province.

Colonel Sink said his forces were partnering with the national police in Wardak and Logar Provinces, giving them advanced training and monitoring whether police units were receiving their pay. The Afghan national police until recently were paid less than Taliban fighters, often had little or no training, and have high levels of illiteracy and drug abuse. This year their pay was greatly increased, financed by NATO and its allies directly, which in some cases doubled a policeman's income. Typical pay in Wardak is now about \$240 a month for the lowest ranks, compared with the \$200 that Taliban recruits are paid.

However, coalition monitors discovered that many of the police officers were not receiving all their pay because of skimming by their paymasters. To solve that, NATO's training mission in Afghanistan has been paying 54 police officers by text message, as part of a pilot "Pay by Phone" program in Jalrez District. .

Because the area has no banks, the plan was for them to collect their pay from the local office of Roshan, an Afghan cellphone carrier. "The first time we did that, the policemen thought they had gotten a 36 percent pay raise," said Col. Trent Edwards of the United States Air Force, who oversees that project. "They had no idea how much they were really paid."

He called it "leveraging technology to mitigate the opportunity for corruption."

However, a corrupt Afghan commander soon found a way to leverage back, and in November he took all the SIM cards from the policemen's phones and tried to collect the money himself, according to Colonel Edwards.

A Roshan Mobile Money representative reported that to American officers, who urged the Ministry of the Interior to crack down on the officer, and the practice was stopped, Colonel Edwards said. No one was prosecuted, however.

Now the NATO training mission is hoping to hand control of the program over to the Ministry of the Interior and expand it to other districts and provinces.

While the likely defection of the Afghan police officers kept officials busy in Wardak Province, in Helmand Province, the Marines further consolidated their hold over the areas they had seized last weekend in the Taliban center of Marja.

The day had a different character from Wednesday, when the company came under heavy sniper fire. On Thursday, the Marines, who had set out before sunrise and pushed into an area where the Taliban's fighters had not yet been challenged, appeared to catch the insurgents off guard.

Company K of Third Battalion, Sixth Marines, the unit that had seen the heaviest and most sustained combat since the operation began, swept a wide area of agricultural fields and small compounds, skirmishing with Taliban fighters as they moved.

The Taliban did not manage to mass forces to react to the Marines as they bounded swiftly across the fields and isolated small insurgent teams. The company killed 11 fighters in several separate engagements, captured an enemy machine gun and detained an Afghan man. The man was found in a compound that contained many materials used in bomb making, including sacks of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, remote-control devices, several cellphones, batteries and spools of fine copper wire.

The patrol also found a large improvised explosive device rigged along a route between buildings that a previous patrol had walked. A string rigged to be used as a pull-cord to detonate the explosive had not been completely buried and was seen by one of the infantryman. The bomb was destroyed in place.

As the company continued to clear territory and fight, it was simultaneously shifting to other missions. A meeting with local elders was planned for Friday. One of the platoons was also assigned to establish a compound for an Afghan police unit that was expected to arrive soon — a sign that the Marines hoped to begin establishing a government presence in the area.