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U.S. Sending Training Agents to Afghanistan to Stem Infiltration of Local Forces

By RAY RIVERA and ERIC SCHMITT

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Concerned over the growing pattern of Afghan soldiers and police officers attacking their coalition counterparts, the American military is sending 80 counterintelligence agents to [Afghanistan](#) to help stem the threat of Taliban infiltration in the Afghan National Security Forces, military officials said Friday.

These intelligence specialists will enhance the vetting of recruits, review profiles of soldiers who are being trained and generally tighten up the procedures to identify individuals who might be vulnerable to extremists' appeals, officials said.

Some of the agents have already arrived, and the rest are expected soon, said Lt. Col. David C. Simons, a spokesman for the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan.

Since March 2009, at least 57 people, including 32 American troops, have been killed in at least 19 attacks in which Afghan service members have turned their weapons on coalition forces. Another 64 were wounded. The totals do not include the attackers, many of whom were killed in shootouts or in suicide blasts.

More than half of the casualties occurred in the first five months of this year, signaling an escalation in the number and intensity of the attacks. But while the Taliban often takes credit for these attacks, NATO officials say the majority of the episodes stem from disagreements and arguments that escalate into violence.

“These incidents are exacerbated by austere battlefield conditions, combat stress, fatigue and cultural misunderstandings,” Colonel Simons said.

Nonetheless, he added, “the threat of infiltration is real.”

The attacks are increasing as NATO forces are racing to train and build up the Afghan Army and the police to a force of 395,000 by 2014. The buildup is critical to American and NATO exit strategies, which include turning over all combat and security duties to the Afghan forces over the next three years. But the pace is also putting strains on Afghan agents to screen the flood of recruits.

One of the worst attacks occurred in April, when an Afghan Army pilot [shot and killed eight American service members and a contractor](#) during a meeting of foreign and Afghan officers on the military side of Kabul International Airport. At least three NATO soldiers have been killed in two attacks since then.

The attacks have continued despite efforts to improve screening of recruits and [crack down on the illegal sales of police and army uniforms](#).

The Taliban frequently take credit for the attacks, and say they have recruited young people across the country to join the national security forces as sleeper agents. NATO officials say that they have no evidence that infiltration is widespread or that any insurgents have successfully joined the service with the intent of attacking coalition forces.

Whether the infiltration is widespread, the claims are hard to contest, and serve to shake popular confidence in the growing army and police forces.

Adding to that distrust is the problem of Afghan soldiers and police officers — and impostors dressed like them — attacking military installations and government compounds.

Afghan intelligence officials on Friday could not say how many of these attacks have happened. But the list is lengthy and growing, said Lutfullah Mashal, a spokesman for the National Directorate of Security, the main intelligence agency.

Many of the attacks involved insurgents using army or police uniforms and fake government identifications, he said. “But there were also those types of attacks in which enemies had infiltrated our national forces and then carried out the attacks, and we are seeing an increase in these attacks,” Mr. Mashal said.

Last month, an Afghan soldier with eight months on the force helped a suicide bomber obtain an army uniform and identification needed to carry out [an attack inside the national military hospital](#), one of the worst attacks in the capital this year. The [attack killed six people](#) who were training to be medics and wounded more than 20 other people, including several medical students.

In April, a police officer who had recently joined the force entered the tightly secured police headquarters in the city of Kandahar, [killing the police chief](#), a widely admired figure from his days as an anti-Soviet fighter.

The Security Directorate arrested nearly a dozen people this week in connection with an April suicide attack on the Defense Ministry that killed two Afghan soldiers, an Afghan intelligence officer said. The people arrested included “high-ranking” officials with the Defense Ministry and the Interior Ministry, which oversees the Afghan National Police, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the delicacy of the case.

Coalition forces sharply escalated the training of the Afghan counterintelligence agents in November, after a well-regarded Afghan border policeman opened fire on American soldiers in Nangarhar Province, killing six. The Taliban quickly claimed responsibility for the attack, but investigators now believe that the soldier acted out of personal distress, including his father’s insistence that he accept a marriage contract with a young girl.

The new American agents will presumably work with their Afghan counterparts, whose job is to identify possible insurgents among Afghan forces and to look for signs of service members who, acting either out of financial or personal stress or because of threats to their families, might fall under Taliban influence. Nearly 200 Afghan agents were in the field as of April, and that number is expected to more than double by year’s end.