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Fighting Fire with Fire

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By Anuj Chopra in Jalrez District

As the security situation deteriorates in Afghanistan, the US-led coalition is reviewing a new initiative in the form of local militias to restore security in its restive provinces, Anuj Chopra writes for ISN Security Watch.

The Afghan Police Protection Program, or AP3, was launched in March across four districts of Wardak province in central Afghanistan. The ambitious pilot program, set up by General David McKiernan, the former top US commander in Afghanistan, aims to train an anti-Taliban militia, known colloquially as the Guardians.

This new strategy, akin to the 'Sunni Awakening' movement - a successful US effort to win over Sunnis in the violence-prone Anbar region of Iraq - is designed to complement the increase of US troops in the country. About 21,000 US troops are expected to arrive in Afghanistan by year's end, bringing total troop strength to 68,000.

Local Afghan men who wish to join the anti-Taliban militia must be nominated by village elders. The chosen men are taken to a US base for three weeks of military training, after which they are given olive-green uniforms and AK-47 rifles. They patrol local mosques, schools, hospitals and government installations in white Ford pickup trucks for a monthly salary of about \$125.

The program is currently being reviewed by General Stanley McCrystal, the new top NATO commander in Afghanistan. If the program succeeds in Wardak in putting a tourniquet on the US' hemorrhaging war against the Taliban, he could replicate the program across other Afghan provinces.

There are currently 539 Guardians operating in four districts of Wardak. In one of them, Jalrez district - a lush, fertile valley replete with fruit orchards - once in the grip of the Taliban, there are indications the program has restored some sense of security.

"Before the Guardians came, this district was 80 percent insecure. The Taliban were everywhere," Sayad Jawad Bahunar, the sub-governor of the district, told ISN Security Watch. "But now people feel much safer."

Militia concerns

Some Afghans have raised concerns that spawning local militias and arming them with weapons could exacerbate the violence. But US officials dismiss these fears as unwarranted.

"We only arm them with AK-47s. We don't provide them with heavy weaponry," Colonel David Baker of the coalition forces' special operations command, the US military unit that oversees AP3, told ISN Security Watch. "This is just an additional tier of security."

This program is designed to run only in "semi-secure areas," he emphasized, and not in areas where the Taliban insurgency is most lethal.

"We won't put them in volatile areas like Helmand, where they will be easy targets," he said. "We are not training them to complement the Afghan police force and national army. AP3 will free them up to focus on bigger security issues."

The Guardians are an easy target even in 'semi secure' areas like Wardak. Two Guardians from Chak district, where the Taliban maintains a menacing presence, were abducted by insurgents just days before the presidential elections last month.

They managed to flee, Colonel Baker said, but the Guardians are at as much risk as any other Afghan employed by coalition forces or the civilian government.

While the Guardians struggle to hold ground in Chak, in another district called Nerkh, the program is a stupendous success, he said. Nerkh, until last year, was a volatile region where there was little trust in the government machinery. In Nerkh, there was a lot of local suspicion of central government, national police and all government offices, but the Guardians managed to penetrate the region and win over the confidence of the local tribal elders.

"They now talk to them, share their problems and help identify where Taliban plants IEDs," he said.

But Colonel Baker worries about Taliban sympathizers infiltrating the ranks of AP3.

"The vetting process includes extensive background checks to eliminate these elements," he says. "But it's still a concern."

AP3 and development

Afghan officials emphasize that the AP3 program is closely tied to development.

Development projects are offered as incentives to every village that nominates candidates. Jalrez, for example, has been promised a health clinic and a power and an irrigation project. However, villages face the perilous risk of giving up development projects if they pass up the opportunity. But such instances are rare, Afghan officials say. AP3 provides a much-needed

source of livelihood in Jalrez, where jobs are scarce, and has the potential to wean away youths who would have joined the Taliban for economic reasons.

"Ninety percent of people join the Taliban for economic reasons," Halim Fidai, the governor of Wardak province told ISN Security Watch. "Very few join the Taliban for ideological reasons."

A 21-year-old Guardian from Sanglakh village who did not want to be named said he was unemployed before this opportunity. He had no military experience and only recently learned how to grip an AK-47. "Even without experience, Afghans aren't unfamiliar with guns," he told ISN Security Watch.

Reviewing AP3

Just a day after the voting in Afghanistan's landmark presidential elections last month, General McCrystal traveled to Jalrez for a day-long review of the AP3 program. His review, in consultation with Afghan officials, is crucial in determining the future of the program.

General McCrystal toured Sanglakh, a village in Jalrez, with his security entourage, ambling past apple orchards and negotiating shallow twisting streams littered with rocks, stopping to speak with local Afghans and Guardians about AP3's progress. A majority of them testified that the Taliban in the region were less menacing since the Guardians emerged in the village.

After a quick tour, General McCrystal sat down under the cool shade of a mulberry tree. In neighboring mud houses, women, shrouded in black, peered out of their windows to stare at his security entourage. In the sky, choppers, keeping a vigil on the village, thwacked the air.

As he sat down, General McCrystal asked Afghan officials accompanying him a rather complicated question.

"We, the coalition, came to Afghanistan in 2001. But the insurgency has got much worse since 2005. What did we do wrong?"

"When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, overnight, people in Kabul embraced skirts and ties. When the Taliban came, the same people wore black turbans and pathani suits. When democracy came, there was a mix of suit-clad and turban-clad people," responded Halim Fidai, the governor of Wardak. "All invaders judged us by our attire. No one looked at the essence of Afghans."

"What do the coalition forces ought to know about Afghans before they arrive here?" the general asked again.

"If you need to search houses, you must let Afghan forces lead from the front," said Syed Ali Abbas Khubadi, 42, the AP3 commander of Jalrez district.

"Your culture is very different from ours," Gen McCrystal averred. "It took a long time for us to understand that."

The future of AP3

In many ways, securing Wardak, abutting Kabul - and known as the gateway to the capital city - is crucial to ensuring the latter's security. In recent months, the US had increased its troop commitment to Wardak more than tenfold. Some 3,500 US troops from the 10th Mountain Division pushed into Wardak in February.

But like the 'Sunni Awakening,' the AP3 has hints of a NATO exit strategy built into the program. And what happens to the Guardians once the coalition forces leave Afghanistan? Borrowing from history, some express concerns that there is a danger the Guardians might turn hostile to the state once they are no longer on the US payroll.

"Nothing in Iraq translates exactly in Afghanistan," Admiral Greg Smith, NATO's director of communications, told ISN Security Watch. "The Guardians are paid through the ministry of interior. Withdrawing it or continuing it will be an Afghan decision, not an American one."