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Afghanistan's Soldiers Step Up Killings of Allied Forces

By MATTHEW ROSENBERG

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KABUL, Afghanistan — American and other coalition forces here are being killed in increasing numbers by the very Afghan soldiers they fight alongside and train, in attacks motivated by deep-seated animosity between the supposedly allied forces, according to American and Afghan officers and a classified coalition report.

A decade into the war in Afghanistan, the report makes clear that these killings have become the most visible symptom of a far deeper ailment plaguing the war effort: the contempt each side holds for the other, never mind the [Taliban](#). The ill will and mistrust run deep among civilians and militaries on both sides, raising questions about what future role the United States and its allies can expect to play in Afghanistan.

Underscoring the danger, a gunman in an Afghan Army uniform killed four French service members and wounded several others on Friday, according to an Afghan police official in Kapisa Province in eastern Afghanistan, prompting the French president to suspend his country's operations here.

The violence, and the failure by coalition commanders to address it, casts a harsh spotlight on the shortcomings of American efforts to build a functional Afghan Army, a pillar of the Obama administration's strategy for extricating the United States from the war in Afghanistan, said the officers and experts who helped shape the strategy.

The problems risk leaving the United States and its allies dependent on an Afghan force that is permeated by anti-Western sentiment and incapable of combating the Taliban and other militants when NATO's combat mission ends in 2014, they said.

One instance of the general level of antipathy in the war exploded into uncomfortable view last week when video emerged of American Marines urinating on dead Taliban fighters. Although American commanders quickly took action and condemned the act, chat-room and Facebook posts by Marines and their supporters were full of praise for the desecration.

But the most troubling fallout has been the mounting number of Westerners killed by their Afghan allies, events that have been routinely dismissed by American and NATO officials as isolated episodes that are the work of disturbed individual soldiers or Taliban infiltrators, and not indicative of a larger pattern. The unusually blunt report, which was prepared for a subordinate American command in eastern Afghanistan, takes a decidedly different view. The Wall Street Journal reported on details of the investigation last year. A copy was obtained by The New York Times.

“Lethal altercations are clearly not rare or isolated; they reflect a rapidly growing systemic homicide threat (a magnitude of which may be unprecedented between ‘allies’ in modern military history),” it said. Official NATO pronouncements to the contrary “seem disingenuous, if not profoundly intellectually dishonest,” said the report, and it played down the role of Taliban infiltrators in the killings.

The coalition refused to comment on the classified report. But “incidents in the recent past where Afghan soldiers have wounded or killed I.S.A.F. members are isolated cases and are not occurring on a routine basis,” said Lt. Col. Jimmie E. Cummings Jr. of the Army, a spokesman for the American-led International Security Assistance Force. “We train and are partnered with Afghan personnel every day and we are not seeing any issues or concerns with our relationships.”

The numbers appear to tell a different story. Although NATO does not release a complete tally of its forces' deaths at the hands of Afghan soldiers and the police, the classified report and

coalition news releases indicate that Afghan forces have attacked American and allied service members nearly three dozen times since 2007.

Two members of the French Foreign Legion and one American soldier were killed in separate episodes in the past month, according to statements by NATO. The classified report found that between May 2007 and May 2011, when it was completed, at least 58 Western service members were killed in 26 separate attacks by Afghan soldiers and the police nationwide. Most of those attacks have occurred since October 2009. This toll represented 6 percent of all hostile coalition deaths during that period, the report said.

“The sense of hatred is growing rapidly,” said an Afghan Army colonel. He described his troops as “thieves, liars and drug addicts,” but also said that the Americans were “rude, arrogant bullies who use foul language.”

Senior commanders largely manage to keep their feelings in check, said the officer, who asked not to be named so he could speak openly. But the officer said, “I am afraid it will turn into a major problem in the near future in the lower ranks of both armies.”

There have been successes, especially among the elite Afghan commandos and coalition Special Operations forces, most of whom have undergone in-depth cultural training and speak at least some Dari and Pashto, the two main languages spoken in Afghanistan. But, as highlighted by the classified report, familiarity in most cases appears to have mainly bred contempt — and that, in turn, has undercut the benefits of pairing up the forces.

The problem has also featured in classified reports tracking progress in the war effort, most of which are far more negative than the public declarations of progress, said an American officer, who asked not to be identified because he was discussing secret information.

“If you get two 18-year-olds from two different cultures and put them in New York, you get a gang fight,” said Anthony H. Cordesman, a defense expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington who has advised the American military on its Afghan strategy.

“What you have here are two very different cultures with different values,” he said in a telephone interview. “They treat each other with contempt.”

The United States soldier was [killed this month](#) when an Afghan soldier opened fire on Americans playing volleyball at a base in the southern province of Zabul. The assailant was

quickly gunned down. The [deadliest single incident](#) came last April when an Afghan Air Force colonel, Ahmed Gul, killed eight unsuspecting American officers and a contractor with shots to the head inside their headquarters.

He then killed himself after writing “God in your name” and “God is one” in blood on the walls of the base, according to an Air Force investigation of the incident released this week.

In a 436-page report, the Air Force investigators said the initial coalition explanation for the attack — stress brought on by financial problems — was only a small part of Colonel Gul’s motivation. His primary motive was hatred of the United States, and he planned the attack to kill as many Americans as possible, the investigators said.

There have been no reported instances of Americans’ killing Afghan soldiers, although a rogue group of United States soldiers killed three Afghan civilians for sport in 2010. Yet there is ample evidence of American disregard for Afghans. After the urination [video](#) circulated, a number of those who had served in Afghanistan took to Facebook and other Web sites to cheer on their compatriots, describing Afghans of all stripes in harsh terms.

Many messages were posted on public forums, others in private message strings. One private exchange was provided to The Times by a participant in the conversation; the names of those posting matched those on record as having served in the Marine Corps. In that conversation, a former Marine said he thought the video was “pretty awesome.” Another said he hoped it would happen more often.

The 70-page coalition report, titled “A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility,” — which was originally distributed as an unclassified document and later changed to classified — goes far beyond anecdotes. It was conducted by a behavioral scientist who surveyed 613 Afghan soldiers and police officers, 215 American soldiers and 30 Afghan interpreters who worked for the Americans.

While the report focused on three areas of eastern Afghanistan, many of the Afghan soldiers interviewed had served elsewhere in Afghanistan and the author believed that they constituted a sample representative of the entire country.

“There are pervasive feelings of animosity and distrust A.N.S.F. personnel have towards U.S. forces,” the report said, using military’s abbreviation for Afghan security forces. The list of Afghan complaints against the Americans ran the gamut from the killing of civilians to urinating in public and cursing.

“U.S. soldiers don’t listen, they are too arrogant,” said one of the Afghan soldiers surveyed, according to the report. “They get upset due to their casualties, so they take it out on civilians during their searches,” said another.

The Americans were equally as scathing. “U.S. soldiers’ perceptions of A.N.A. members were extremely negative across categories,” the report found, using the initials for the Afghan National Army. Those categories included “trustworthiness on patrol,” “honesty and integrity,” and “drug abuse.” The Americans also voiced suspicions about the Afghans being in league with the Taliban, a problem well documented among the Afghan police.

“They are stoned all the time; some even while on patrol with us,” one soldier was quoted as saying. Another said, “They are pretty much gutless in combat; we do most of the fighting.”