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Resentment festers in ranks of Afghanistan's army

By LAURA KING

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KABUL, Afghanistan -- At the gate of the capital's army recruitment headquarters, a young Afghan sergeant in crisp camouflage and a jaunty beret demanded a letter of introduction from arriving visitors. But when one was produced, written in Dari, the dominant language in Kabul, he asked one of the visitors to read it to him.

These days, Afghanistan's armed forces are under pressure as never before to dramatically step up their performance in everything from literacy to logistics. NATO is speeding up its transfer of fighting duties to the national police and army, and at the same time, the cash-pinched coalition intends to cut back substantially on plans for funding a long-term Afghan force strength of more than 350,000.

Even as senior allied commanders proclaim that a leaner, better-trained Afghan force will be capable of taking over most fighting duties from Western troops by the end of next year, the problems that have long plagued the Afghan police and army - repeated turncoat shootings aimed at Western mentors, drug use, high attrition rates, inadequate vetting of recruits, persistent logistical weakness and vulnerability to insurgent infiltration - are coming into sharper focus.

Recently leaked classified military reports, together with an unusually candid public assessment from an experienced U.S. military officer, have served to spotlight the degree of mistrust, mutual

distaste and sometimes outright enmity between Afghan forces and their ostensible North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies at joint bases across Afghanistan.

Army Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis, who served two tours in Afghanistan, published his scathing assessment of the Afghan police and army in an essay in the Armed Forces Journal this month. In a vividly recalled anecdote from Kunar province, in Afghanistan's east, he recounted a conversation last year with a police captain whose position had been attacked by the Taliban.

When Davis asked whether he and his men, knowing the insurgents' position, intended to counterattack, "the captain's head wheeled around, looking first at the interpreter and turning to me with an incredulous expression. ... 'No! We don't go after them,' he said. 'That would be dangerous!'"

The combination of proximity and cultural differences sometimes produces a volatile atmosphere between Afghan and Western troops who live and work together on joint bases, according to more than a dozen current and former junior officers in the NATO force and their Afghan counterparts who were interviewed about training practices.

Western military public-affairs officers may constantly highlight success stories arising from the training program, particularly the measurable improvement in the abilities of elite Afghan forces. Afghan troops are also beginning to take the lead in major military operations, and thousands of recruits are learning to read and write.

But day-to-day encounters between Western and Afghan foot soldiers are often fraught with anger and misunderstanding, these officers said.

Often, the Afghans describe their Western mentors as crass, patronizing and overbearing, while the NATO forces struggle to combat what they describe as a sometimes shocking lack of motivation and discipline on the Afghan side.

Afghan men are traditionally sensitive to any perceived insult, and with weapons readily at hand, what might otherwise be a small altercation can swiftly flare into a tragedy. An Afghan soldier from Balkh province in the north, who spoke on condition of anonymity after having deserted his unit last year, bitterly described being belittled by his German trainers for what he considered a minor infraction, though he considered himself a superior fighter.

"I was ready to confront my enemies, while they only want to hide in their bases," he scoffed. "I could have done something to them they would always remember."

Ominously, the Taliban and other insurgent groups have come to understand that so-called green-on-blue shootings - Afghan police or soldiers opening fire on Western troops - can have a dramatic effect on the willingness of NATO countries and their allies to meet previously agreed-to training commitments. That was illustrated last month when France announced a sped-up end to its combat role, days after an Afghan soldier killed four French soldiers and wounded more than a dozen, some seriously.

Australia, another troop-contributing nation, was roiled early this month by a video on a Taliban-affiliated website that purported to show a fugitive Afghan soldier who had shot and seriously injured three Australian troops in southern Afghanistan in November boasting of his deed, and saying others in his unit had often spoken of their wish to carry out similar attacks.

"I had one mission on my mind: to kill foreigners and teach them a lesson," he said. "We are Muslims. We cannot accept foreigners."

Afghanistan's largest ethnic group - the Pashtuns, from which the Taliban movement is largely drawn - is underrepresented in the police and army, leading to simmering ethnic resentments within the ranks, as well as a tense relationship between Afghan troops and villagers in the mainly Pashtun south and east. Those are the regions where fighting has been most intense, and where Afghan soldiers from the north of Afghanistan - mainly ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks - are considered almost as foreign as the NATO troops.

Potential Pashtun enlistees are more often turned away, recruiters said, a practice that may serve as something of a safeguard against inappropriate loyalties, but also breeds a sense of grievance.

"From the 'safe' parts of the country, we can take almost anyone," said Col. Mohammad Akbar Stanikzai of the Afghan national recruitment command. "But from the places where there are security problems, we would maybe take five or six out of 20 who applied."

Also worrisome to some local Afghan officials are plans to turn a number of particularly dangerous areas over to Afghan control sooner than initially planned. Several district leaders in areas to be handed over in coming months expressed strong misgivings about whether police and army units could confront the insurgents without Western help.

The No. 2 commander of the NATO force, U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, acknowledged to reporters at the Pentagon this month that among American troops, there is a widespread negative view of the Afghans whom they serve alongside.

"Let's take an American soldier or a private. At times this private will tell me that they (Afghan forces), they're not that good," he said. "But a private is looking at it from the perspective of how he's trained, or the Marines are trained, and the standards are very different."

The ultimate size and role of Afghan forces are to be a prime topic at a NATO summit in May in Chicago. In advance, the allies - mindful of burgeoning costs in a difficult economic climate - are seeking consensus on a "sustainable" target size for Afghan forces, perhaps around 230,000.

With both the police and army still undergoing a rapid buildup that has doubled the security forces' size over the last 18 months, the notion of reining in that growth raises the specter of a large bloc of "armed unemployed" who might bear a grudge against the Afghan government if what they had believed would be a steady long-term job came to a premature end.

A report this month by Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies contends that the Western military command "sharply downplays" structural problems, including a shortfall of trainers, rushed development, corrupt leadership and fealty to warlord figures.

Although Afghan army recruiters accumulate a voluminous paper file on each applicant, they appear to make little meaningful effort to assess the likelihood that a given man might eventually prove a danger to Western troops.

Col. Stanikzai, the recruiting official, acknowledged that basic questions go unasked, such as how potential recruits feel about the insurgency, or whether they consider themselves loyal to the Afghan government.

"Why would we ask them that?" he said. "Who would tell the truth?"