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Attacks by Afghan army on foreign troops rise

Low pay, mistrust and general dissatisfaction with the Kabul government are cited as possible reasons for killings.

Ali M Latifi
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Recent increases in attacks on blue-clad foreign troops by men in the green uniforms of the Afghan National Security Forces are raising renewed questions about the trajectory of the decade-long war in Afghanistan.

So far this year, 45 international coalition forces have been killed by their Afghan counterparts in so-called "**green-on-blue**" insider attacks, up from 35 deaths in 2011 and 20 killings in 2010.

Earlier this month, the Kabul government held what it called an "**extraordinary security meeting**" to discuss and analyse evidence on attacks accounting for 17.5 per cent of all coalition deaths so far in 2012.

Aimal Faizi, the Afghan president's spokesman, said the killings were the result of "infiltration by **foreign spy agencies** into Afghan security forces".

Analysts, however, say blaming foreigners masks the real challenges facing Afghan security forces and the government needs a clear assessment of the problems to assess why Afghan forces are attacking their coalition counterparts.

Lax hiring practices, coupled with divided loyalties among the population, mean Afghan security forces can be easy to infiltrate. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have increased recruitment rates by more than 60,000 in 2012. Afghan forces currently have about 300,000 members and the central government is aiming to increase their ranks to 352,000 by October 2012.

Harsh economic reality

With unemployment hovering at around 35 per cent and nearly half the population living below the poverty line, the nation's security forces, funded largely by the US, are one of the only employers in the Central Asian nation to constantly be hiring.

Members of the ANSF are paid \$165 per month, compared with an average annual household Afghan income of around \$400.

"The ability to properly vet any potential recruits becomes all the more important" when these economic factors are taken into account, Wahid Monawar, former Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations in Vienna, told Al Jazeera.

Some police officers complain that the central government in Kabul is beholden to foreign forces.

Faiz Mohammad, a member of the Afghan National Police force in Zaranj, the capital of southwestern Nimroz province, says the government of Hamid Karzai has been incapable of directly providing the Afghan National Security Forces with fundamentals. "We have nothing of our own," he told Al Jazeera. "Even our salary comes from the Americans."

The central government in Kabul pays only about four per cent of the budget for Afghan forces, with the rest coming from foreign groups, primarily the US.

Major Martyn Crighton, a spokesperson for the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF), told Al Jazeera that Afghan forces "belong to and partner with" their coalition counterparts on a daily basis without incident.

'Didn't bring stability'

Daily interactions between foreign and Afghan troops notwithstanding, some Afghan forces feel they are taking on greater daily risks while getting little moral support from the administration of

Hamid Karzai, the president.

"For the US in particular, resolving this is a priority," Colin Cookman, a security policy analyst with the Centre for American Progress, a think-tank, told Al Jazeera. "This reflects the resource and management capacity of the Afghan government - limited resources."

In a conversation with a member of the ANSF in the southern province of Kandahar, Wazhma Frogh, executive director of the Research Institute for Women, Peace and Security, says the soldier told her: "We didn't have water to drink or food to eat and we were fighting on the front lines. The American forces behind us, who weren't on the front lines, would have the best food and bottles of water in front of them."

Like other members of Afghan society, many inside the security forces are unhappy with the current state of affairs in the country, twelve years after foreign forces helped oust the Taliban.

Martine van Bijlert, co-director of the Afghanistan Analyst Network, told Al Jazeera that the expectations of soldiers and average citizens may have been too high but general frustration that the past decade "didn't bring peace ... didn't bring stability" to the country, permeates across the ANSF ranks.

'Propaganda'

Regardless of who is actually responsible for Afghanistan's problems, there is "a lot of propaganda" by the Taliban and government opponents to "paint a negative image of this government and international forces", Omaid Sharifi, a transition coordination consultant, told Al Jazeera.

Propaganda is particularly strong in areas where the positive affects of the international presence are not easily apparent.

Abul Rahim, a shopkeeper in the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul says that night-time raids into Afghan houses by foreign forces are one cause of local resentment. "We are traditional," he told Al Jazeera. "Maintaining safety and authority over our own households is everything for us."

Rahim says such "insults" against the local population leave a lasting mark on the psyche of Afghan troops.

The NATO and US soldiers "have created the opportunity for these green-on-blue incidents", said Iqbal Hussain Gajri, a university student in Kabul. "They did many things insulting our religious beliefs, like burning the Quran," he told Al Jazeera.

Such "insults", including video made public online in January showing US marines urinating on the bodies of dead Taliban fighters "leave a lasting mark on the Afghan soldiers", the student said.

A recent announcement that the six US Marines seen in the video and three troops implicated in the burning of Qurans at the Bagram airbase in February would not face **criminal punishment** creates a renewed sense of worry among some community members.

The Quran burning led not only to a series of **angry protests**, but also to one of the year's first insider attacks when two US advisers were **shot dead** by an Afghan in a military uniform on the fifth day of demonstrations.

"All it takes is an appeal to their emotions to get [Afghans] to turn on the coalition," said Wahid Monawar, Afghanistan's former UN representative. And that is a major cause of concern, for the US and the Afghan government.

Politically, attacks by Afghan forces on ISAF troops are a "big deal" for US President Barack Obama, Cookman said. "His entire exit strategy is based on a handover of security responsibility."