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Afghan forces fight an enemy within

Lal Aqa Sherin
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KABUL - A Taliban fighter infiltrated the Afghan police force, killing seven Afghan officers and British soldiers. Similar attacks have taken the lives of US troops.

The Interior and Defense ministries deny that the screening of prospective soldiers is poor, but a police officer admitted to Killid that he was accepted into the Afghan National Police (ANP) after submitting falsified papers that were never verified by recruiters.

On November 3, in Helmand's Nad e'Ali district, a group of British soldiers from the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards sat down to breakfast at an ANP compound known as Blue 25. Among them was an ANP officer named Gulbadeen from Musa Kala district. Gulbadeen had been with the ANP for two years, and graduated from police academy last year.

But on that November morning his true allegiance became clear. While inside the Blue 25 compound, Gulbadeen drew his weapon, fired first at his Afghan commander and assistant commander and then turned the gun on the British soldiers who were there to mentor and train the Afghan police. In all, five foreign soldiers and two ANP were killed. Another five British soldiers were injured before Gulbadeen fled the compound, hopped on a motorcycle and made good his escape.

Despite a massive dragnet by the Ministry of Interior (MOI), secret police and British forces, Gulbadeen remains a free man. MOI officials declined to comment about the incident, citing the continuing investigation, but a Taliban group later took credit for the shootings.

This is not the first such attack on coalition forces by a member of the Afghan security services. Last March, an Afghan National Army (ANA) soldier opened fire on a group of US soldiers in Mazar-e-Sharif, killing two and wounding a third. One of the dead was a female navy officer named Florence Choe, a doctor who specialized in treating Afghan children.

Attacks like these undermine a crucial aspect of the coalition effort in Afghanistan.

Battlefield training and mentoring programs are contingent on a foundation of trust between Afghans who want a more secure nation and foreign armies delivering knowledge and expertise. But when Western soldiers lose trust in the men they are mentoring, resentment builds on both sides and the mission breaks down.

At the heart of these attacks lies a frightening commonality: poor screening of police and army applicants. Apparently all it takes to join these forces is an easily forged national identity card and at least one working leg.

It's hard to blame the police and army for taking allcomers, however. The security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating more quickly than new recruits can be given uniforms and with expanding units - such as the southern border guards - security forces will need fresh personnel for some time.

Also, one in 10 ANP officers will die in the line of duty this year. As grim as it sounds, those men need to be replaced, even if it is by those of lesser mettle.

Experts and former members of the Afghan security forces fear that the lax selection process has allowed insurgents easy access to the ranks of police and army.

Retired Colonel Aqa Muhammad Logari says that attacks like the one on November 3 are proof that insurgents have a toe-hold within the security forces and worries about more such attacks if the government does not become more careful about whom it hires and arms.

"The government should take this issue more seriously," Logari says. "They should not let just anyone join the army and police. It damages everything from moral to the [Afghan security forces'] public image."

Despite their protestations to the contrary, some Afghan government officials acknowledge that there is an effort on the part of insurgents to break into government security forces.

In the aftermath of the attack on British soldiers, Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak told The Washington Post that the ANA has had to be "very watchful because we do have reports that [insurgents] are really trying to infiltrate." Wardak did, however, say "as far as the army's concerned, we have been relatively successful. It has not been a major problem up to now."

Wardak says that the army wants to implement a biometric scanning system of the kind used by coalition forces in Afghanistan. The scanners record retinal images, fingerprints and other data. The information can be checked against an existing biometric database of insurgents as well as used as a record of all successful recruits.

Wardak repeated that the police had a much bigger insurgent infiltration problem than the army.

When asked about The Washington Post story, an MOI spokesman, Zmarai Bashari, blanched, denying the defense chief's statement. "We do not approve this report," Bashari says of the story. "It is not true. The MOI does not have any reports that enemies have infiltrated the police, except in one or two instances."

Some of the friction between the MOI and Wardak could come from the fact that Wardak's

ministry is responsible for the army and the MOI is responsible for the police.

But despite intra-agency squabbles, a parliamentarian, Khalid Pashtoon, says that insurgents have long tried to infiltrate government security forces, even back in the days when the government was Soviet.

"The mujahideen were always trying to find ways to break into the police," Pashtoon says. "It was the perfect way to strike against the government."

In many ways, it still is.