

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	394
Land:	Afghanistan
Kilde:	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
Titel:	Afghan Secret Police to Weed Out Insurgents From Military.
Udgivet:	24. maj 2011
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	10. juni 2011

Title	Afghan Secret Police to Weed Out Insurgents From Military
Publisher	Institute for War and Peace Reporting
Country	Afghanistan
Publication Date	24 May 2011
Cite as	Institute for War and Peace Reporting, <i>Afghan Secret Police to Weed Out Insurgents From Military</i> , 24 May 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ddf7f4c2.html [accessed 7 June 2011]

Afghan Secret Police to Weed Out Insurgents From Military

Worried about Afghan soldiers and police who turn their guns on their own side, Kabul has assigned the intelligence service to keep a close eye on the armed forces.

The government ascribes a spate of attacks on NATO troops and Afghan officials to the Taliban infiltrating the Afghan National Army, ANA, and Afghan National Police, ANP, or masquerading as members by obtaining uniforms. Analysts say this has been going on for some years, but a spate of high profile deadly attacks has prodded the government into action.

Lotfullah Mashal, spokesman for the National Directorate of Security, NDS, said the agency would for the first time place units within recruitment centres and other facilities of both the defence and interior ministries, which control the ANA and ANP, respectively.

“Recent incidents have forced the NDS to work in close coordination with the defence ministry and the interior ministry,” he said, without detailing how this scrutiny would work.

The most recent case of its kind occurred on May 12, when an Afghan policeman killed two United States Marines in Helmand province in the south. On April 27, nine US military officers were killed by an Afghan pilot at Kabul airport.

Nine days before that, an intruder dressed as an ANA soldier got inside the defence ministry and shot dead two soldiers and injured seven other people before being killed. Officials said he was wearing explosives packed around his body, and had been trying to get to the minister, Rahim Wardak. A statement from the Taliban indicated that they believed – wrongly – that visiting French defence minister Gerard Longuet was also inside the ministry.

This attack came just three days after two attacks involving insurgents disguised as members of the security forces. A suicide bomber in military uniform killed five NATO soldiers, four ANA members soldiers and an interpreter at a military base near the eastern city of Jalalabad. The chief of police of Kandahar province, Khan Mohammad Mujahed was killed along with two of his staff when a suicide attacker dressed as a policeman got inside his headquarters.

The biggest single attack took place in the eastern Nangarhar province in February, when a Taliban member in police uniform entered a branch of Kabul Bank and killed 40 civilians and military personnel.

In cases such as suicide attacks, the obvious advance planning and the Taliban’s

subsequent claim of responsibility indicate that either the attackers had joined the security forces as sleeper agents, or else they simply stole the uniforms.

In other cases, though, shootings seem to have occurred spontaneously after a dispute, with no obvious link to the insurgents. In the Kabul airport attack, for example, the Taliban claimed that the pilot concerned was a sympathiser, but his family and friends denied this.

As there is little that can be done to prevent security personnel running amok, the new measures seem mainly designed to weed out potential Taliban plants from the ranks.

A spokesman for the interior ministry, Zmarai Bashari, said that as well as getting help from the new NDS units, the police were introducing biometric data system to identify new recruits.

“After this system is activated, dangerous individuals will be prevented from joining the ranks of the police,” he said.

Defence ministry spokesman Zaher Azimi said a similar system using photographs, eye scans and thumb prints would be introduced at ANA recruitment centres.

He acknowledged that at the moment, recruitment offices did not have computer systems.

Azimi said the checks currently in place included background investigations and the requirement that two people vouch for each potential recruit. This was to be strengthened so that the two people providing a reference would have to appear before the recruitment officers to be identified and registered.

A spokesman for the Taliban, Zabihullah Mojahed, told IWPR that the government had tried such measures before and they would not work, as the insurgents already had men inside the government armed forces.

“Many of our men have been placed in the national army and police ranks. We can use them whenever we want,” he said. “These measures will have no negative impact on operations by our future suicide attackers and our allies.”

Mojahed also sought to claim ownership of attacks not directly connected to the insurgents.

“Even military officers who aren’t in contact with us take up arms against the foreigners when they observe their cruelty - particularly that of the Americans - and cannot tolerate it. You have seen many examples of this.”

Some analysts argue that giving the intelligence service a stronger role will go some way to countering the threat of infiltration by insurgents. They recall the Soviet-backed regime of the 1980s, when the feared Khad secret service had an all-pervasive presence, making it difficult for the mujahedin to penetrate urban centres to attack government buildings.

Others argue that the NDS suffers from many of the weaknesses shared by the army and police.

“The army, police and NDS are not committed to the national interests of Afghanistan,” said one critic, Kabul University student Mohammad Ashraf. “All three institutions are divided into factional, tribal and linguistic groups. We have even heard of several cases where the army has fought against the police, and the police against the NDS. Coordination among them will never be assured. I believe these [new security] measures will only add to the problems.”

Even without infiltrating the armed forces, however, the insurgents can easily get hold of uniforms. They have been on sale in shops or tailoring workshops for many years, and thieves, kidnappers and drug smugglers habitually wear military gear.

Faruq, a criminal investigations officer with the Kabul police force, said action had been taken to close down businesses that had made or sold uniforms in the city.

One of those forced out of business, Nabi Jan, complained that the shutdown by police was a pointless exercise.

"I don't believe the Taleban or anyone else has trouble getting hold of army and police uniforms if they want to," he added.

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