

AFGHANISTAN BEGINS PURGE OF ARMY WHILE NATO CHIEF PROMISES “CULTURAL AWARENESS TRAINING”

In a news conference this morning, Afghanistan's Defense Ministry spokesman General Zahir Azimi announced that “hundreds” of soldiers have been dismissed from the Army or detained in a probe that began six months ago and is aimed at removing soldiers with ties to insurgents and therefore pose a risk for green on blue attacks. Separately, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen telephoned Afghan President Hamid Karzai to urge further action by Afghanistan to stem green on blue killings. Remarkably, Rasmussen acknowledged that NATO training on “cultural awareness” is important to stopping the increasing rate of these attacks. After first attempting to retroactively classify the report “A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility” it appears that perhaps NATO is finally ready to take actions aimed at implementing its recommendations to raise the awareness of NATO troops regarding actions and attitudes that conflict with deeply-held beliefs of Afghan recruits.

Reuters describes Azimi's press conference:

The Afghan army has detained or sacked hundreds of soldiers for having links to insurgents, the Defence Ministry said on Wednesday, as it tries to stem an alarming number of so-called insider attacks eroding trust between Afghans and their allies.

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“Hundreds were sacked or detained after showing links with insurgents. In some cases we had evidence against them, in

others we were simply suspicious,” Ministry spokesman Zahir Azimi told reporters in Kabul.

“Using an army uniform against foreign forces is a serious point of concern not only for the Defence Ministry but for the whole Afghan government,” Azimi said, adding that President Hamid Karzai had ordered Afghan forces to devise ways to stop insider attacks.

It is very interesting that Azimi claims this probe of the Army began six months ago:

He said his Ministry started an investigation into the attacks, which are also called green-on-blue attacks, within the 195,000-strong Afghan army six months ago.

Khaama adds a bit of detail on the basis for expelling or detaining soldiers:

Ministry spokesman Mohammad Zahir Azimi did not provide any other details or specific numbers on Wednesday. He said many of the troops had been discharged from the military because they had suspect documents, either incomplete or forged.

Several aspects of this account stand out. First, the extreme breakdown in screening that occurred as the Army was expanded rapidly to meet the size NATO projected would be necessary for the handoff of security responsibility when NATO troops leave in late 2014 is highlighted by the discovery of soldiers with “incomplete or forged” documents. Also, it appears that this re-screening is just as sloppy, as Azimi did not provide precise figures on how many soldiers have been re-evaluated or even how many had been removed from the force. Add to that the admission that some soldiers were removed on the basis of suspicion rather than firm evidence.

Finally, though, there is one detail that has nagged me both in this story and in other stories from the past week or so where there have been passing references to the failure to issue “credentials” to recruits who have completed training. It is well-known that the US maintains a huge biometric database in which fingerprint and iris data on a huge number of individuals is stored. I was under the impression that the database includes both villagers who have been screened for potential militant links and ANA or ANP personnel who have completed training. With such an important tool already at hand, why has there not been a program to issue something like photo ID’s with embedded chips allowing re-screening of ANA or ANP personnel any time a question arises? This would seem like an obvious step to get around the issue of stolen uniforms contributing to the insider attacks, and yet there seems to be no mention of it being implemented.

In a separate development, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen telephoned Hamid Karzai to urge further action to stem the attacks:

NATO’s head called Afghan President Hamid Karzai on Wednesday to express “deep concerns” about a surge in rogue attacks on foreign soldiers.

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In a telephone call with Karzai, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen “reaffirmed our continued commitment to the ISAF mission and emphasized that the strategy remains on track,” spokeswoman Carmen Romero said.

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Rasmussen outlined measures to try to stop the insider attacks that include strengthening vetting procedures, better counter-intelligence and cultural awareness training, and he urged Karzai to join in those efforts, Romero said.

As noted above, even this new re-vetting of the Army seems to me to be falling short of the level that would be needed to remove the bulk of the threat. The call for better counter-intelligence becomes a bit sinister here, as Karzai's new nominee to head the National Directorate of Security is known for his reliance on torture. However, the most outstanding item in that list from Rasmussen is the final one. After being present in the country over ten years, NATO is finally admitting that there is a need for "cultural awareness training" on the part of its troops. Given the extreme cultural divide described in the report that the US tried to retroactively classify, the question arises of whether so much damage has been done on this front that repairing it will take longer than the projected time for NATO troops to remain in Afghanistan. At the very least, if the most offensive actions can be curbed, then it stands to reason that a few lives can be saved.