KARZAI EXPELS SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES FROM AFGHAN PROVINCE OVER PROGRAM AT HEART OF PETRAEUS' "SUCCESS"

Today's story in the Washington Post covering Afghan President Hamid Karzai's decree expelling US Special Operations forces from a province just outside Kabul illustrates how completely the upper levels of the US military have been ignoring reality in Afghanistan. The Post reported that the "announcement appeared to come as a surprise to American military officials". For those who have been paying attention, it has been clear that Afghanistan has been upset for years over a program tied to US Special Operations forces that develops what amounts to private militias which are sometimes under the Afghan Local Police name and sometimes not. These groups are particularly lawless and have been reported to participate in revenge killings, disappearances and torture (which are also the specialties of JSOC). And this program was at the heart of David Petraeus' operations when he took over in Afghanistan:

> Jack Keane, a former Army general and a mentor to David H. Petraeus, the American commander in Afghanistan when the program began, said that "the brilliance of the program is also the vulnerability" because recruits are selected by elders, not by Americans. Although there has always been some form of NATO vetting, "we're totally dependent on their judgment as to who they've selected."
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> And some groups continue to warn of the dangers of reintroducing militia-like

> forces to a country long bedeviled by warlords. Last year, Human Rights Watch reported instances of killing, rape, theft and other abuses among the local police that raised “serious concerns about the A.L.P. vetting, recruitment and oversight.” The group added: “Creation of the A.L.P. is a high-risk strategy to achieve short-term goals in which local groups are again being armed without adequate oversight or accountability.” (At the time, NATO said that some aspects of the report were dated or incorrect.)

Although a short pause in Special Operations forces training of Afghan Local Police took place back in September when the article quoted above came out, it is clear now that the “re-screening” of ALP personnel was a sham and that the abuses under this program continue. Here is Khaama Press describing Karzai’s decision:

> After a thorough discussion, it became clear that armed individuals named as US special force stationed in Wardak province engage in harassing, annoying, torturing and even murdering innocent people. A recent example in the province is an incident in which nine people were disappeared in an operation by this suspicious force and in a separate incident a student was taken away at night from his home, whose tortured body with throat cut was found two days later under a bridge. However, Americans reject having conducted any such operation and any involvement of their special force.”
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> “The Ministry of Defense was assigned to make sure all US special forces are out of the province within two weeks,” the statement said adding that “All the Afghan national security forces are duty bound to protect the life and property of people in Maidan Wardak province by

> effectively stopping and bringing to justice any groups that enter peoples' homes in the name of special force and who engage in annoying, harassing and murdering innocent people."
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> This comes as US special forces and their interpreters were accused of misbehavior and humiliation of innocent local residents in Nekh district of Maidan Wardak province earlier in January.

Most of the news reports covering this move by Karzai do note that Special Operations forces are expected to play a key role after the "withdrawal" of coalition forces planned for the end of 2014. As noted in the Guardian:

> Security in the province bordering Kabul has deteriorated over the past year, and it has become a focus of US-led efforts to stop insurgents reaching the capital. The decision could have implications for relations with Washington and for US plans to maintain a counter-terrorist force in Afghanistan after Nato combat troops leave in 2014.

And the New York Times adds further persepctive:

> The ban was scheduled to take effect in two weeks in the province, Maidan Wardak, which is seen as a crucial area in defending the capital against the Taliban. If enforced, it would effectively exclude the American military's main source of offensive firepower from the area, which lies southwest of Kabul and is used by the Taliban as a staging ground for attacks on the city.
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> /snip/
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> Much of the work done by American Special Operations forces in Afghanistan

> or anywhere else is highly classified, and information about it is closely guarded. A senior American military officer, for instance, said he did not know whether such forces were based in Maidan Wardak or were based elsewhere and were flown in for missions.
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> /snip/
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> With the withdrawal of American forces picking up pace, most of the coalition's conventional forces in eastern Afghanistan, including in Maidan Wardak, have shifted into advisory roles. Among coalition troops, offensive operations are increasingly becoming the sole purview of the Special Operations forces.
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> United States officials, in fact, are planning to rely heavily on the elite troops to continue hunting members of Al Qaeda and other international militants in Afghanistan after the NATO mission here ends in 2014.

Karzai's move adds more difficulty to the negotiation of the Status of Forces Agreement that will govern the presence of any US forces in Afghanistan after 2014, for which it seems NATO wants to dangle an additional $22 billion in front of Afghan officials for potential embezzlement. Only the Guardian article linked above links these accusations against Special Operations forces with the key issue in the SOFA, immunity for remaining US forces:

> The palace announcement served as a reminder that the size and nature of western forces remaining in Afghanistan after 2014 are far from agreed. Karzai was reportedly irked but reports from a Nato meeting in Brussels on Friday [http://www.navytimes.com/news/2013/02/ap-german-minister-says-us-to-leave-8k-12k-troops-afghanistan-022213/]

> , at which a follow-out force of 12,000 was discussed. Leon Panetta, the outgoing US defence secretary was quoted as saying that the mainly American force would be deployed in all areas of the country. Observers in Kabul suggested that Karzai's announcement was intended as a message to Washington not to take Afghan acquiescence in US decisions on bases and unilateral counter-terrorist operations for granted. There have also been tough negotiations between the Washington and Kabul over American demands that serving US soldiers should have immunity under Afghan law.
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> "This decision is going to complicate the negotiations over bilateral security agreements with the United States," Najafizada [head of current affairs at TOLOnews television channel] said. "The Americans want to be able to carry out unilateral counter-terrorist operations after 2014 which can justify their presence domestically in the US, but now it seems to be the hard piece to negotiate, along with immunity."

By linking Special Operations forces with heinous crimes, Karzai appears to be sending the message that he rejects the notion of immunity for remaining US forces. Otherwise, the statement about "bringing to justice any groups" responsible for these crimes becomes meaningless. Of course, the allure of a $22 billion pot of funds ripe for embezzlement could make a principled stand difficult for Karzai.

Update: Thanks to a tweet from @ArifCRafiq, I see that the Washington Post has provided a new article with more details from the Afghan allegations. This bit looks new to me and is what Rafiq tweeted:

> In the interview, Khogyani also said 60 tribal leaders were recently rounded up by U.S. special forces – backed by

> Afghan troops claiming to belong to “Afghan special forces” — then taken to a base and beaten.