

AGREEMENT ANNOUNCED ON SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN WARDAK PROVINCE, EXPLANATIONS VARY WIDELY

NATO is claiming that there now is an agreement with Afghan President Hamid Karzai regarding the withdrawal of US Special Operations Forces from Maidan Wardak province in the wake of Karzai's insistence last month that the troops leave immediately. Despite the presence of an agreement, however, there appear to be many different explanations for just what the agreement means for how long US SOF will be present in the province. Given the history of the US bargaining with Afghanistan in bad faith (see, for example, this post on the Parwan Prison handover and work backwards in time through the links and this post for a description of US reliance on semantics in making these sham agreements), it is not at all surprising to me that these initial reports on the agreement would cite a lack of specificity and that different news organizations would come up with widely differing descriptions of its expected effects.

Reuters puts its doubts about the meaning of the agreement right up front in its report:

Afghan President Hamid Karzai and NATO-led forces have reached an agreement on the departure of foreign troops from a strategically key province near the capital, coalition forces said, but it was unclear if U.S. special forces would leave.

An Afghan defense ministry spokesman

told reporters in Kabul that the elite American force would quit Wardak within a few days, despite earlier U.S. concerns that their departure would leave a security vacuum.

The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan said in a statement Afghan security forces would take over security from coalition forces in Wardak, but did specifically mention the withdrawal of U.S. special forces.

Note that Reuters knows that ISAF statements must be parsed carefully and they do a good job here of warning us that ISAF did not state outright that US SOF would leave the province.

Writing for AP, Kimberly Dozier provides less analysis of the statements received, and so her report provides conflicting information from ISAF and from an Afghan spokesman. The article opens:

The U.S. military and the Afghan government reached a deal Wednesday on a gradual pullout of American special forces and their Afghan counterparts from a contentious eastern province, officials said.

President Hamid Karzai has blamed the troops for egregious human rights abuses in Wardak province, allegations which U.S. military officials have steadfastly denied.

However, NATO forces said in a statement that commander Gen. Joseph Dunford agreed with Karzai to remove American troops first from Wardak's Nerkh district and then later from other parts of the province.

But then the information from an Afghan spokesman presented next appears to conflict

with the ISAF information:

Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman Gen. Zahir Azimi confirmed there has been a deal in a news conference in Kabul on Wednesday.

"The international forces are ready to withdraw the special forces from Nirkh district of Maidan Wardak province and Afghan army units are going to replace them in the coming days," Azimi said, adding that there are no other U.S. commando units in the rest of the province.

A U.S. military official explained that a small, mostly U.S. army special operations team would withdraw from Nerkh, as would the Afghan local police force that works alongside the Americans.

Azimi states outright that the only US Special Operations Forces in Wardak are in the Nerkh district and that these will be withdrawn. Dozier misses the point that Reuters parsed out, namely, that it appears that ISAF speaks of US forces withdrawing from the province while being silent on whether SOF also would withdraw.

There is a larger problem with Dozier accepting Azimi's statement at face value, though. In this post, I addressed what is known (unfortunately, September, 2012 is the latest information from this map) about Afghan Local Police presence in Wardak:

If we read the detail in the map, we see that Wardak province has seven districts for ALP, for which a total of 1400 ALP personnel have been authorized but only 579 were on hand at the time of the snapshot. Three of those seven ALP districts were designated as districts where the ALP were the validated BattleSpace Owners (BSO), two were validated but presumably still under

CSOJTF-A control and two were not yet validated. This wide range of validation and battlespace ownership status for the districts within Wardak make sorting out the claims of crimes carried out by ALP personnel hard to assign to any one overall responsible entity.

Drilling down further, we see that Nerkh had 74 ALP on hand as of the snapshot. Even though ALP are listed as the battlespace owners in that district, Azimi admits that US SOF are still deployed with them and will withdraw along with them. However, that still leaves over 500 ALP in other districts and not described as withdrawing in the agreement. Those ALP forces must have SOF deployed with them as well. Azimi's statement that the only US SOF in Wardak are in Nerkh does not fit with the data that are publicly available. The Reuters skepticism on withdrawal of SOF from the bulk of the province appears to be well-founded when the number of known ALP personnel in the rest of the province is considered.

TOLONews in Afghanistan directly comes to the conclusion that SOF will remain in other districts of the province (even choosing as a headline "Karzai Agrees US Will Remain in Wardak"):

President Hamid Karzai Wednesday reached an agreement with top US Commander in Afghanistan Gen. Joseph Dunford that US Special Forces will remain in most of Maidan Wardak province.

Dunford met with Karzai at the palace Wednesday morning to finalise the details, according to an Isaf statement.

Under the agreement, the Afghan National Security Forces will move into Wardak's Nerkh district, which is currently secured by Afghan Local Police aided by US forces. The timeline for this transition will be determined by the

Afghan government, Isaf said.

“The remainder of the province will transition over time,” Isaf added, without stating a time frame.

The decision is a clear change from Karzai’s original order for the US to completely withdraw from the province by March 11.

BBC chooses not to try to understand what the agreement really means:

The BBC’s Quentin Sommerville in Kabul says that the agreement is short on specifics – no timetable has been reached on when the special forces will leave. But it does allow Mr Karzai to save face.

Considering how “vital” ISAF has claimed the Wardak Province is as a gateway to Kabul, I find it impossible to believe that the 505 known ALP in districts other than Nerkh are no longer in Wardak, so their accompanying US SOF must also still be present. It seems very likely to me, then, that somehow General Azimi has chosen to lie about how many US SOF and ALP are present in Wardak so that Karzai can save face in agreeing to this token withdrawal of a small fraction of the ALP and US SOF known to be in the province.