

DOD'S BUNGLED ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON RE- VETTING ANSF AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

On Saturday, I noted that the move by US Special Operations forces to halt training of Afghan Local Police and Afghan special forces while those entire forces were re-screened for security threats meant that there would need to be an equivalent action taken on the larger effort to train the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police while they are re-screened:

So, while only Special Operations forces have suspended training for now, it is hard to see how this will not extend to all training of Afghan security forces soon, because the lapses in screening of recruits applies equally to the much larger ANA and ANP forces (approximately 350,000 for those two forces combined, compared to various estimates in the 20,000 range for the ALP and Afghan special forces when combined).

Even though it was a holiday weekend, it is remarkable that Pentagon Spokesman George Little was taken so off-guard in this line of questioning that Marcy pointed me to in Tuesday's transcript:

Barbara, do you have a question?

Q: Thanks, two questions. On green-on-blue or insider attacks, what I didn't hear you mention was that – what ISAF tells us is essentially all 350,000 Afghan security forces either have gone or are going through the process of being re-screened. And that comes from

ISAF. So what would you – what does – what do you say to the families who have lost loved ones or their colleagues in the military after so many incidents this year alone? Who's accountable for it taking so long for the U.S. military, for the coalition to realize they had to re-screen? Because for months, we were told isolated incidents, and apparently not.

MR. LITTLE: Well, let me put this in some perspective here, Barbara. It's not that we have come only recently to this issue. We've taken it seriously for some time. In March of this year, six months ago, the – ISAF issued a tactical directive – and let me just list all that that tactical directive contained. It made it the adoption of specific and tailored force protection measures. Personnel and increased risks from insider attack were required to undertake specific close quarter combat and active shooter training. All commands are required to conduct refresher training, particularly for mentors and others who routinely work side-by-side with Afghans.

The directive required additional in-theater cultural awareness training. The directive also asked that coalition force units create safe zones inside ANSF compounds where they can defend themselves if necessary. And more recently, there's been a great deal of focus by General Allen and his team on the importance of Guardian Angels, small unit leadership, and counterintelligence matters that will help identify potential attackers early on.

Q: But why did it take – and I have a follow-up to this, please – why did it take so long for the military in the department to come to the conclusion

that 350,000 troops had to be re-screened? Why did (off mic)

MR. LITTLE: Three hundred and fifty thousand troops?

Q: Well, ISAF tells us that essentially it's much more than the ALP, that – and it's much more than what special ops had ruled, that it's essentially everybody is being re-screened.

MR. LITTLE: I haven't spoken with my colleagues in Kabul today, but, you know, this is something that we have to, you know, constantly be on the lookout for. This is a war zone. I can never take the risk of insider attacks down to zero. I wish I could. But I can't. But what we can try to do is put as much effort into identifying potential attackers as early on as possible to try to stop insider attacks.

Note that Barbara Slavin is asking Little to address the fact that ISAF had already admitted that a complete re-screening of all 350,000 ANSF had been undertaken and that this flew in the face of previous DoD claims that green on blue incidents were isolated. Little's response, though, was to regurgitate steps along the lines of those described in the booklet on green on blue defense measures that Jason Leopold recently published in Truth-Out. Slavin persisted and asked Little to respond directly to the ISAF admission that all 350,000 ANSF were being re-screened, and Little first tripped over the number being so large and then completely punted by saying he hadn't spoken to anyone in Kabul about the point.

Note that this is not even a move all the way to suspending training of the larger group, it is merely the formal acknowledgement that the security lapses that allowed improperly vetted individuals into the ALP training program also apply to the larger ANSF.

The extreme challenges presented by screening Afghan recruits are described in this piece that Marcy linked in a comment for my post yesterday:

Alam Gul, a potential Afghan Local Police (ALP) recruit sat cross-legged on a mat outside the unit's crumbling, mud-brick headquarters in the village of Tabin, in Kandahar's restive Arghandab district, alternately looking at his hands and at the sky as he answered a series of questions. Two ALP members sat watching nearby, while others washed motorbikes or lounged in the sun. The U.S. Army specialist and staff sergeant in charge of the interview were getting increasingly frustrated with the young man.

Seemingly simple questions often have no good answer in Afghanistan. When asked where he lived, Gul only said that "there are four or five houses between my home and the mosque." Asked in what direction from the mosque, he, like many uneducated Afghans, did not know the meaning of north, south, east and west. He guessed his age as being "between 28 and 30." His secondhand motorcycle was unregistered. He had no mobile number. It was even unclear at which mosque he worshipped, since he could not read a map and Staff Sergeant John Fox did not know the names of all the mosques in the area. Fox, working with experienced interpreter Aziz Mohammad Shirzada, was finally able to narrow it down to only: "Right there, when we come around that corner going into Bala Tabin."

The answers were crucial since NATO and the U.S. use registration numbers and interviews with mullahs and village-council members to find out more about the men who apply for positions with the ALP, as well as the army and the police. The vetting process was deemed critical

after members of extremist militias in Iraq were inadvertently armed by the U.S. in a similar effort called the Sons of Iraq, put into place in 2005, after being insufficiently screened. But with no contact details, little verifiable history and no address or registration number, the Americans were running out of ways to figure out who exactly the young man was. Doing proper background checks to ascertain if recruits could have Taliban affiliations or sympathies is just one of the many challenges facing the U.S. and NATO as they prepare for withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

Perhaps because Little's response to the re-screening question was so bungled, the Pentagon yesterday provided Lieutenant General James Terry, who is Deputy Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan to answer questions. The entire exchange is very informative, but it appears that Terry is trying to backtrack a bit from saying that all 350,000 ANSF members need to be re-screened:

Q: General, it's Tom Bowman with NPR.

There was a lot of talk yesterday about reinventing the Afghan local police, some 17,000. But over the weekend we got a statement from British Lieutenant General Adrian Bradshaw that said this is just one part of an intensive effort to re-check the vetting status of the entire 350,000 Afghan national security force.

Can you tell us, why is it necessary to re-check the entire Afghan force? Do you think they built it up too quickly? And how long will this all take and what is the U.S. doing to help in this intensive effort?

LT. GEN. TERRY: That's a great

question. It's an important question. One of the things we're helping is to provide some of our capability inside the MOI and MOD to help them look at themselves and see themselves in relationship to this vetting process.

And I think what we'll wind up doing then is, as we gain more information from our investigations and from the Afghan internal investigations inside of minister of interior and minister of defense, we'll probably be able to select populations out there within both of those ministers that we can better focus our vetting and screening efforts. In other words, go back in and look at specific populations that we think are at risk.

And I'm sorry, what was the second part to the question?

Q: Well, how long will this all take? And also how is the U.S. helping in this?

And also, if you could address why is it necessary to do the entire force? Clearly, it wasn't done well the first time.

LT. GEN. TERRY: Right. Again, I think what we're doing is going back and identifying through the analysis of what we are seeing, and then working with our Afghan partners, we're going to look at specific populations within the Afghan national security forces. And then that helps us actually prioritize where we need to look.

And in relationship to vetting the entire force, I'm sure it will take considerable time, but I think what the Afghans want to do is be very sure of their process and then go back and re-check.

But, again, we're going to help them prioritize that. We're going to talk to them about specific techniques that they can use in terms of establishing those priorities.

Thanks.

In the midst of this questioning, Terry did describe the eight essential elements of the vetting process:

Q: Sir, Richard Sisk, Military.com.

Can you give us, general, some idea of what actually happens in this vetting process? What are the nuts and bolts? Is someone called in for an interview? What actually happens?

And if this is going to be done for all 350,000, how long is that going to take?

LT. GEN. TERRY: Yeah, again, I can – I can name you the eight steps in the vetting process. And, again, I think they're looking for inconsistencies in it, which helps streamline the process.

First is, you know, what we call a valid Tazkira out there, which recruits into the security force collection points or the Afghan national army volunteer center. So they have to have, number one, a valid Tazkira out there.

They have to have letters from guarantors out that, they're government officials or village elders. They have to have personal information verification, which they go through a pretty extensive interview process where they're interviewed about that information.

They go through a criminal records check. That's both ANP internal investigation and ANA, out there with a four-person council.

And then they apply. They have an application. That gets validated, and then the paperwork is moved to the recruiting authorities. They go through drug screening, a medical screening, and then biometric enrollment.

So, again, I think what the Afghans are doing at this point are looking at how to improve their vetting process so to get it straight for the future, and they're looking toward inconsistencies that they see in the current force that's out there that might cause them to bring people in and take a look at 'em.

I can't tell you right now how long this process will take.

See this reference for a description of the identity card called a "Tazkira". As we saw in the Time article above, such documents often don't exist for many Afghans. As Tom Bowman of NPR noted in his question, it is becoming a widespread assumption that the push to increase the size of the Afghan Security Forces so quickly was what led to cutting corners on documentation. And as the Time article noted, the military should have been aware of this problem from a similar experience in Iraq.

Terry's statement does confirm that after vetting, recruits are put into the biometric database. As I suggested yesterday, the biometric data could have been used in a very efficient way to generate an ID card with embedded data linking to a recruit's biometric record. Security checkpoints that combine a fingerprint scanner with a card scanner could then verify that Afghan troops are who they claim to be. Such measures, however, are only as effective as the underlying screening that puts the recruit into the system in the first place.

It is not surprising that Terry would begin to push back against the concept of a complete re-

evaluation of the entire ANSF and would instead claim that there are shortcuts that can be used to find the most risky recruits. The entire process has consisted of short-cuts to reach the troop size that has been projected to be needed to achieve the hand-off of security arrangements to Afghan control. Also keep in mind that the most recent estimate I have found still puts the attrition rate for Afghan Security Forces at 25% per year, so any actual halt to training would mean a steady decline in force size.

Finally, though, Terry completely bungled his description of cultural awareness training:

Q: General, it's Mike Evans from the Times.

Can I ask you, sorry, about the insider threat again? Since about 75 percent of the cases of green-on-blue appear to be non-insurgent-related, are you not more concerned about there being a build-up of cultural differences, cultural resentment between particularly the Americans as they are getting more of the victims and more of the cases than anyone else, and their Afghan partners? Isn't that something which should be of greater concern?

And you mentioned also one aspect that where Afghan soldiers go on leave. I wondered if this is a particular problem where it becomes known to the Taliban that a local guy has joined up, he's come back for a bit of home leave, is that a very vulnerable time when these guys might be either radicalized or intimidated?

LT. GEN. TERRY: Yeah, I would just say that we offered to the Afghans they ought to take a look at the leave period. I offered that one – that one to them personally based on my experience in the United States Army.

I find that my soldiers are most

vulnerable as they – as they go out on leave as they expose themselves outside of the structure of the Army. And so I asked the Afghans, the national security forces to take a look at that.

We are – back to the cultural sensitivity piece of this – I would just say there are a number of factors that go into the remaining percent out there. We believe that 25, 26 percent of that – that other percentage out there personal related. Some of that can be defused with a greater understanding of cultural sensitivities.

I would just say that what we all recognize is that this is a society that's really been traumatized by 30-plus years of war. It also has a gun culture out there. And we also understand that a lot of grievances and dispute resolutions are done, frankly, at the barrel of a gun out there.

[Emphasis added.]

If ever we needed an example of the top levels of command in the US military contributing to the cultural insensitivities that ignite green on blue killings, here we have it. The US invaded Afghanistan almost eleven years ago and has been killing people there, with guns and other weapons, the entire time. The US also is known internationally as a very gun-violent country. Despite all that, Terry has the temerity to say that Afghans resolve grievances and disputes “at the barrel of a gun”. Terry’s statement reveals a galling lack of self-awareness and personifies the ignorant arrogance that underlies many green on blue killings.

Postscript: I hope that someone in the press has the opportunity to follow up on Terry’s mention of his observation that his own troops are “vulnerable” when they “expose themselves outside of the structure of the Army”. What is

this vulnerability? How is it expressed and what is the outcome when these troops return to duty?