

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL ROBERT W. CONE, COMMANDING GENERAL, COMBINED SECURITY TRANSITION COMMAND-AFGHANISTAN, AND COLONEL BILL WENZLER, COMMANDER, AFGHANISTAN REGIONAL SECURITY INTEGRATION COMMAND EAST, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2007

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): With us today on the bloggers' roundtable, Major General Robert W. Cone, who is the commanding general for Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan. And with him also, Colonel Bill Wenzler, who is the commander of the Afghanistan Regional Security Integration Command East.

So with that, thank you, gentlemen, for joining us this morning. And do you have an opening statement?

GEN. CONE: That, I do. Again, this is General Cone here. My job is to train and equip the Afghan National Army and police. This is a job that ranges from the tactical training of individual soldiers and policemen to the coaching and teaching of Afghan army and police units in combat situations, all the way to mentoring key leaders in development of ministerial systems.

I'm very pleased to talk with you today and share a few insights about working here in Afghanistan and helping develop these important institutions.

My command consists of about 4,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, as well as several thousand contractors. We are stationed all across Afghanistan, with mentors assigned wherever the Afghan national army and police may be employed.

The key to our success in Afghanistan is enabling Afghans to take the lead in all aspects of their security. The Afghans are a noble people who strongly desire to defend their own nation. Our job is to provide the coaching, teaching and mentoring, as well as the critical resources to make that a reality. Afghans are stepping up all across this nation to the challenge of taking the lead in this fight.

With that, I'll take your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, very good. Thank you very much.

Bruce, you were online first, so why don't you get us started?

Q General, Bruce McQuain with QandO.net.

A question on, I guess, the biggest problem that we've heard in Iraq is standing up the ISF over there and getting them to operate independently. Is that also a problem in your area?

GEN. CONE: My view is it's far less of a problem. The reason is, if you think about how the Afghan army was stood up, it was stood up as truly a national institution. So, for instance, I can take you to warehouses. I can show you transportation companies. It is much more mature in regard to the institution's ability to provide logistics.

Is it perfect? No. We still have problems. It's something they learn about. Soldiers who get into the fight don't always think about logistics. We think we've all learned that the hard way. But the Afghans have an emerging capability.

Just as an anecdote, one of my ARSIC commanders was telling me that an Afghan unit battalion in a fight had made the decision that they would eat three hot meals a day. And we all know what that takes to be able to deliver chow like that. You know, they waived off their Halal meals and decided that they were going to eat three hot meals.

They delivered them -- cooked them and delivered them. And I think that's a pretty good assessment of the status of logistics for the Afghans. Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir. And Grim.

Q Good morning. This is Grim, blackfive. I was looking at the fact sheet your office sent out. It says that Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan is under the control of U.S. Central Command and the United States ambassador to Afghanistan.

Could you talk a bit about how these kinds of interagency authorities are working out? We also -- the CPA in the early days of the Iraq war. And I wonder if you could talk a bit about how that kind of joint authority or other interagency authority is working and evolving as we do this in the long term.

GEN. CONE: I think it works superbly here in Afghanistan. We have a tremendous working relationship with Ambassador Bill Wood and his team. In many cases in countries, of course, you have an Office of Security Cooperation. And that was really the genesis of the Combined Security Transition Command.

When we took leadership for a number of things, the army and the police, we formed this Combined Security Transition Command that is really such a large command in so many of its resources. We are tied back to CENTCOM as our higher headquarters. And, of course, Ambassador Wood, as the senior policymaker in theater, dictates policy in regard to things like the police, for instance, clearly fall in his realm.

The other folks we have a relationship with is the ISAF, and that is commanded by General Dan McNeil, who is a tremendous soldier. And we have a superb working relationship with those two other entities, as well as Task CJTF 82 and Major General Dave Rodriguez and his folks. And they are the lead U.S. element in country, the national coordination element.

So on a wiring diagram, it may look somewhat complicated. The reality of it is, it breaks down to personal relationships, which I think are simply excellent here in Afghanistan.

Q If it comes down to personal relationships, does that mean a bad set of relationships is all it would take to screw up an arrangement like this in the future?

GEN. CONE: I'm not sure I'd say that. I think that, you know, these relationships have evolved over time. And I don't think we've had a bad one yet, so I'm not sure I'd go with that logic.

Q What I'm trying to find out about, what I'm looking at, is the question of whether, for example, State and DOD have kind of ironed out the differences in running an interagency organization so that, if there's a difference of opinion, they're able to handle it smoothly. And you say it works very well where you are, and you think it might be based on some of the established relationships and trust you've built up over time. I'm wondering if you've also got sort of rules of the road backing that up.

GEN. CONE: Yeah, I would argue that we do. We have memorandums of agreement that basically define sort of more programmatic responsibilities that exist between organizations. For instance, I would describe the shared responsibility between the State Department, that has lead in policy on police matters, and C-STICKA (sp) that is the lead executor of police matters.

And then you have INL that has the traditional responsibility of police training. And we have a relationship with them where we're working together in the training of the police. And again, I think we have a memorandum of agreement in effect. We have a new program going in, and we'll back that up with another memorandum of agreement, not because we don't trust each other but because when you're involved with oversight of training responsibilities, you want it codified in some way.

Q Yes, I agree. Thank you very much, General.

MR. HOLT: Andrew Lubin.

Q General, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point.

Sir, when I was embedded with Task Force Phoenix in April, I was wildly impressed with the ANAs. ANPs and the border police were a different situation. And now we're reading about how Afghanistan is providing record hauls of opium into the world market.

What are we doing to wean them off the corruption problems where they're still more loyal to the village leaders and warlords than they are to the central government?

GEN. CONE: We have a very comprehensive program right now specifically that affects the police through the Ministry of Interior. And one of the things that will be announced in the next probably 48 hours or so will be the completion of the 17,000-person rank reform in which we've gone through and identified almost like a promotion board, and then a series of vettings that have taken place to ensure that we have the right leadership, leadership that is

accountable within the police. And it'll take us some time to get these folks into place.

The second part I would talk about is the need for properly paying these police. And again, some might argue that some of the roots of corruption are inadequate pay to the police. And, in fact, we have also recently set in what we call the pay reform and pay parity program that essentially will put them on the same sort of pay system that we put the army on several years ago. And again, that has worked very effectively. These two tools of rank and pay reform and pay parity have done very well for the army in regard to corruption.

And then, finally, what we're looking at is the use of mentors, U.S. and coalition mentors that will work closely with the Afghans at the district level. And I think the key point is we reinforce accountability when we have a set of eyes, coalition eyes, that are present to make sure that we're reinforcing the right business practices.

It won't be easy. It will take time. The business of policing is a very difficult business in a country with the drugs that we have here and a tribal system and a number of things. But we're fairly confident that as we move forward that this will yield some results.

Q Because there's a pride in the ANA that was nice to see. Like you said, they're proud of being Afghans. They've got a long tradition. They're proud of being in the Afghan National Army. Forgive me; I didn't see that with the police. They were just -- they're regional. They're tribal. They're village-oriented. You know, they're still shaking people down at the drop of a hat. It's like they're eager to -- (inaudible) -- the same 80 bucks a month. It's a mind-set that was disturbing after a couple of years of this.

GEN. CONE: Well, you know, I think, on the positive side, the same type, you know, young people today who are stepping forward to join the Afghan army are joining the police. And I think that that's really part of the key to this thing is, you know, we have a program called a Focused District Development Plan that sort of replicates what we did with the army, which is basically taking the fundamental building block, which is the Kandak or the battalion in the army.

Now we're shifting that to the district, and we'll go in and basically replace, retrain, put in all key leaders, properly equip them, and think that we'll have the same or hopefully the same impact that we had in the army. And so I agree with you; it's a tougher challenge, because the temptations, the interface, the local ties are much stronger to the police. But we've got to step up to this -- the Afghans have to step up to this challenge.

Q Okay, great. Thank you very much. MR. HOLT: All right. And along with General Cone this morning is Colonel Bill Wenzler, who's the commander of the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command East.

Colonel Wenzler, can you give us a brief description of your area of operation and kind of run down how some of these dynamics are working within your area?

COL. WENZLER: Absolutely. Thanks for having me here this evening; this morning, your time. But I'm responsible for the integration of the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, together into one team, one operational node, in the provinces of Paktia, Paktika, Ghazni and Khost.

The ANA, as the general spoke about, is moving along very well. They work very well with our ISAF partners in the region. We have a regional command for watching or mentoring the army. We've also got a new command that we've got in the east that's mentoring the police. Together we bring all these entities together to form the National Security Force, Afghan National Security Force.

The general talked about the district focus that we've got here on the police. And I know that's a big concern of yours from you having been here before. But the answer for this problem with the police, if you say there was a problem, is focusing on the district.

The district is the area that connects those local villagers to the IROA, the government of Afghanistan. That's where it happens. And it's working very well in ARSIC East. We've got a lot of work to do with the police, but we started much later. What I'm telling you, bringing them together, working together in operations out there in ARSIC East, they're doing a very good job.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, sir.

And any follow-up questions? Bruce?

Q Yeah, I do actually have one. Thanks, Jack.

Gentlemen, I was wondering, we're reading a lot here about the Taliban changing its tactics and its approach toward the population. I wonder if either one of you or both could address that and kind of let us know what they're doing and what effect that's having.

GEN. CONE: I think the Taliban needs to change its tactics and approach. You know, many of you heard about this big spring campaign that was anticipated. I was here visiting in March. And if you listened to what was being said at the time in the media, you would have expected a huge campaign that was going to take place that would threaten some of the southern cities. That never played out, largely due to the success in the offensive action taken by both ISAF forces and OEF forces here in theater. That said, it still left the enemy with some capability, and the enemy continues to attempt to reorganize to apply that capability. And it is a matter of adapting more quickly than the enemy to basically thwart his intent. And so what we're seeing now is a trend away from direct attacks in many cases towards things like IEDs. We're seeing significantly more.

We know that the Taliban usually does not seek a fight with coalition forces and now is not seeking fights with Afghan forces because they've acquitted themselves so well in combat.

Now they're gravitating towards the police. And now it's our responsibility to ensure that we provide adequate protection and adjust our tactics so that they can't pick off individual police districts out on the edges and peripheries of the nation.

Bill, do you want to add anything to that?

COL. WENZLER: I would just say that you're dead on with what's going on with the Taliban. I would say in our area they feel desperate. They feel like they're actually running for their lives there. They're trying to find places that they can get a big bang for their buck. Coalition forces, led by

the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police, are driving these guys crazy in our area.

Can we defeat the Taliban? I would tell you that the Taliban to me, in our area, is all about the ideology they bring to the table and the support that they think they have from the people. We can defeat the ideology and we can defeat the support that they think they have for it. And that's going on in ARSIC East.

So their attacks -- there's a lot of them. They're more sporadic. They don't do as much damage in our area as they once did because they just can't get as organized. But we're having a lot of success there. But we're defeating the ideology, and they're finding very little support in our area.

Q If I might, are you seeing a flow of arms that you would identify as coming from Iran into the Taliban?

COL. WENZLER: Sir, from ARSIC East, from my perspective -- and the general will follow up here, I'm sure -- but I don't see anything like that in our area. Of course, our area has a border with Pakistan. We don't see any evidence in our area of anything going on that I could really pinpoint there, and certainly not anything from Iran in our area.

Sir?

GEN. CONE: I would agree with your assessment, and that is that we do not have any specific evidence that I am aware of. But again, I'm not an operational commander; I run the coaches, teachers and mentors. Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Grim?

Q Sorry.

Q Grim of Blackfive again.

I would like to ask you about a question that I have asked several guys working in Afghanistan, various military commands, and that is about the role of air mobility with the Afghan police; talking about the police as, you know, sort of the now preferred targets.

I was wondering if there's been any plans to institute a kind of air mobile unit that could help the police respond to ambushes in more outlying areas and bring kind of a rule-of-law-based response to that kind of thing, sort of more like a sort of Texas Rangers type model instead of the division between kind of military responsibilities and then, on the other hand, more localized police model. Could you talk about that?

GEN. CONE: Yes. As a matter of fact, we're working two significant models to support that, one on the military side, that is probably more mature, and one on the police side. Let me talk the military side.

We are forming six commando Kandaks or battalions. This is the equivalent of a Ranger school-like experience in which we put together about 600 highly trained light infantrymen that are capable of conducting air assault operations. And what we have done is, through the acquisition now of Mi-17s, I think, will be the initial airframe that we use.

The intent -- and exactly what you've said; the pattern that this enemy uses would be to identify geographically what is an isolated location where there might be a district police center. And what they're doing is they'll show up and leave a night letter that tells the police they're coming the next day in great numbers. The police, probably wisely, cannot be reinforced, so they might leave their posts. And then what happens is they'll overrun the district center, burn the district center and use it as a photo-op and say they've overrun it. And then, by the time we can reinforce this some number of hours later, they're gone.

So what we would have with these commandos, when we had such a situation, linked into now a network of joint provincial and joint regional coordination centers, that they could call for assistance and that we could enable a very rapid air assault-type response of commandos that could defend that district center or whatever might be threatened. On the police side, we are training what is known as Afghan National Civil Order Police. And again, these will be police that have either a rural function or an urban function that are specialists, literally a SWAT team that are, again, regular policemen that have been through a higher degree of training, and then some very focused training for the regions that they'll be in. And they will be a response force to assist with local police. And again, we've produced our first three battalions of those, and we're getting ready right now to push those out to the field as reinforcement forces for the district police that might be in peril.

Q Thank you. It seemed like an element that might have been missing in our overall tactics in the area. So I'm relieved to hear that it's coming online now.

GEN. CONE: Well, I think you'd be tremendously impressed by the commandos. And having spent some time, U.S. Special Forces runs that school. And I will tell you that these are -- you know, you have to understand, the Afghan soldier, of course, comes from a marshal background. Most of these young soldiers grew up in families where fighting has been a part of their lives. They are very -- they have a great deal of endurance. They have, I think, a high amount of physical strength and, in fact, make very good soldiers.

One of the stories I would relate is I had one of my 06s out who was doing an assessment on one of the units, and he observed an Afghan unit he was traveling with came into an ambush. And, of course, as I'm sure many of you know, one of the most difficult things to do is to teach people the reaction when you're in an ambush is to turn into the ambush and attack.

And what he watched was, you know, a textbook reaction with characteristic U.S. amount of fire power that was fired back at the enemy that quickly broke off the ambush, and they were successful. And the colonel -- I think the quote that he gave me -- I said, "Well, how would you characterize the young Afghans' performance in combat?" He said one word: "Fearless."

Q Outstanding. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Andrew Lubin.

Q Yes. Andrew Lubin from On Point.

I guess my question is for both of you, if you don't mind. I'm not sure I still understand some of the tactics that they use, using the ANPs and

the border police on the border compared to the ANAs. Why aren't they using the army to interdict and stop the Taliban and keeping the police in the towns? Again, I don't understand why the army is not being used more aggressively.

COL. WENZLER: Colonel Wenzler here. I'll tell you, everybody is being used equally as aggressive in the fight out there in our area. But the primary reason why we've got the police in this fight is because the way we do it here is basically the U.S. go with the Afghan National Army. The Afghan National Army always takes the lead. Along with them are the Afghan National Police.

But when we go into an area, you know, it's like the Afghans have to have the lead. The ISAF forces will take the outer cordon. The Afghan National Army will take an inner cordon. And the police will go in and do the clearing and searching of the buildings.

And then once we've gone in and we've taken care of business, then the bottom line is it's up to the police to stay there and enforce the law. The army's got other missions that they need to take care of, and we'll work with the police in another district to take care of another problem, along with the coalition forces bringing the effects in.

But the bottom line is, the police are the ones that are going to stay there. The army's not in every community out there, but the police are. And it takes the police to connect that local community back to the government of Afghanistan, and that's critical.

Q Well, I was thinking, sir, more in the terms -- I was outside of Khyber Pass; (toured with Gates ?). And we were visiting some of the BP stations way up, you know, 10,000, 11,000, 12,000 feet up. Why aren't they staffed by the ANAs instead of the BPs? I mean, the BPs seem to be more avant garde than professional, at least from the ones I saw, the ones I visited.

GEN. CONE: We're working on that. The fact is that one of our major efforts is to look at the training of the Afghan border police, to look at their equipping. And as you know from having been up in that territory, you've got some long-range shots that people are going to take. And if you're outgunned, you've got a problem. And so we're working right now with the Ministry of Interior.

Part of our focused development program is on identifying exactly what you talked about, sort of taking more of identifying key avenues of approach and taking more of a militant approach in terms of capability with the Afghan border police. And some of this -- a border police might look at sort of a picket line sort of approach, whereas the military approach might focus on major avenues of approach, alignment of weapon systems.

And again, how that flows from the Afghan border police being really along the border -- and there's good reasons for that when you talk about the ambiguities that exist between the Pakistan and Afghan border, but making them with their specialized border training, but giving them greater capability, more like a military force, and then handing that fight off to the Afghan forces that are behind them. And so I think we're working towards what you're talking about. Q Okay, appreciate it.

One quick question. I met a General Mangul when I was in Camp Black Horse. He was going to be transferred. Did he get transferred to the government, or is he still in the army?

GEN. CONE: He is now the deputy first minister of security and he is a national treasure.

Q Absolutely, he is.

GEN. CONE: He, in my mind, more represents the Afghan National Police than any other uniformed figure and personally is at the point of everything. He was the Afghan negotiator that was involved in Afghan coordination for the hostage crisis. So he is alive and well. And I will tell you, he's going to be the guy that makes a huge difference in turning the Afghan National Police to be more what we want them to be.

Q He was quite a man. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, gentlemen. And we're just about out of time this morning.

General Cone, do you have any closing comments?

GEN. CONE: I would just add that it is really a rewarding experience in working with the Afghans. They are, as I said earlier, a noble people who have a great sense of personal honor and do, I think, an excellent job of learning and adapting. And I think that what we see with them, I expect great things from them here. And they are already exceeding our expectations in regard to taking the lead with U.S. units.

We've watched some very impressive operations, working with our own 82nd Airborne. And I think everybody that has worked with them -- still, you know, not perfect, but in many ways are learning and adapting and getting better every day at a rate we are all very proud of.

Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Colonel Wenzler, any closing thoughts?

COL. WENZLER: I'd just like to thank you again for the opportunity to talk to you about what we do in ARSIC East here in Afghanistan. And I just want to remind you that we've got a lot of great soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines in my command in ARSIC East and they're doing a great job. They're proud to be representing our country, representing what democracy means to us, and want to help promote freedom and democracy here in Afghanistan. And we're just proud of everybody, and we're working hard to make sure that we get Afghan National Army and police working together, and they can get some primacy here and we can all come home.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, gentlemen, very much, Major General Robert W. Cone, commanding general for the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, and Colonel Bill Wenzler, who's commander of the Afghanistan Regional Security Integration Command East. Thank you, gentlemen, for being with us today. And we look forward to being able to discuss with you again here in another few weeks or so about any operational updates and things you might have to share with us.

GEN. CONE: Great. Thank you much.

COL. WENZLER: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

END.