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Feature: Police Advisers in Afghanistan Take Aim at Corruption, Poor Public Perception

Police Advisers in Afghanistan Take Aim at Corruption, Poor Public Perception

Working under threat of death and with scant resources, DynCorp International trainers take pride in helping rebuild the nation's law enforcement agencies.

By Julie Poucher Harbin

John Palmer, a retired policeman from Kodiak, Alaska, shouts to be heard above the din of a busy Afghan police station in Kabul. "There's been a report of a shooting right near here. I want everybody down here, inside the compound!" Palmer yells.

After some scrambling and radio traffic, sirens sound as a jeep full of police officers and a motorcycle unit speed off down the road, responding to the reported shooting. It's a vast improvement over their situation earlier this year when the police at District 10 police station had to get to their investigations on foot.

Palmer, 49, is a supervisor in charge of six police advisers and one police trainer, all under contract with Irving, Texas-based DynCorp International. He was confident the police would be able to handle the situation on that day in April. For five months, he and his team have been working six days a week at District 10, advising Afghan police on nearly every aspect of law enforcement, from community policing to communications to criminal investigations--and procurement. DI, as the company prefers to be called, helped District 10 push the government to provide the 328-man station with nine Russian jeeps.

The station was designated as a model by Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior in January and is serving as a testing ground for the kind of advancements and improvements that could be replicated across the country.

This mission presents more than a few obstacles to the American police advisers and trainers

who work for DI, a global professional services and project management firm specializing in aviation services, logistics and security operations.

Not only are they trying to build a workforce under adverse conditions, but they are also trying to make changes in a vastly different police culture, where some commanders order subordinates to shake down the citizenry, and the notion of domestic violence as a crime has not quite caught on. Many of the police they train are illiterate. Equipment such as fingerprinting kits can be hard to come by. The job also requires a measure of diplomacy and bureaucratic acumen, given that several nations are involved in the rebuilding of the police and justice systems in Afghanistan.

The DI advisers and trainers also work under the daily threat of death. In August, a car bomb at one of DI's compounds in Kabul killed four employees. Although DI employees are risking their lives, they say they find it rewarding to do the behind-the-scenes training, retraining and advising of a police force fractured by war.

Police in Afghanistan used to be part of the military structure. DI is working to develop a civilian organization by teaching human-rights awareness and democratic and community policing, in addition to improved operational police skills.

Kenneth Schauer, a DI adviser at District 10, retired after more than two decades with the New York Police Department and seven more years in a sheriff's department in Florida. He signed up during a DI recruitment drive and spent four years in the United Nations-led police training mission in Kosovo before coming to Afghanistan nearly a year ago. He has already put in for a one-year extension.

"I find it very challenging and interesting, between language and cultural barriers and things like that," says Schauer, who adds that it was even more challenging than his work with the NYPD's organized-crime unit. "This is the most rewarding thing I can find. I have a sense of pride in my country, and if I feel I can do some good, I do it."

All applicants for jobs as police trainers and advisers with DI must have at least five years' sworn civilian law enforcement experience. Compensation goes up to \$100,324, plus free room and board. Candidates must make it through rigorous physical and psychological testing before they are accepted. Some have been on overseas police missions before, but for many, it's their first time out of the country.

If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a world to develop a professional civilian police organization. DI works under U.S. contract. The U.S. supports Germany, which is the lead nation in this international effort. They all work with the Afghan Ministry of Interior. Since July 2004, DI has been under contract with the U.S. State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs to provide 30 senior-level police advisers directly to the Ministry of Interior. They assist with organizational reform and advise the command staff countrywide.

The "shadow guys"

Retired Army Brig. Gen. Herb Lloyd, vice president of all of DI's operations in Afghanistan, says the adviser relationship with police commanders is a delicate one.

"The job is easy as far as developing that personal relationship, but we've learned a few things along the way," he says. "We never embarrass an Afghan commander or cause him to look like he's a puppet. We push him up to success and we step back in the shadows. We're the shadow guys. We know that's what it takes, and he loves it, and he wants more of it."

Because their connection with the police makes DI employees a target, they are heavily armed when they travel, have strict curfews and aren't allowed to go to restaurants frequented by other foreigners working in Afghanistan. They are frequently followed and get constant intelligence reports on threats to their lives. After dark they lock down in their compounds, where they eat dinner in American-style cafeterias and watch DVDs brought in from the States. And while new

recruits may be tense at the beginning, they eventually get used to life here, the veterans say.

"The support we have in force protection, in compound security, enhances our ability to get work done. The security that we have, the vehicles that we have to move about the country in, including aircraft, lessen our exposure," says Douglas Smith, employed by DI as contingent commander for the police training and advisory program.

DI's contract with the State Department's law enforcement bureau also entails the provision of basic training and update courses for all police in Afghanistan, including national police, border police and highway police at the central training center in Kabul, as well as six regional training centers. About 80 DI American police trainers, plus three American employees of the Justice Department and nine international police trainers, have trained more than 800 Afghan police instructors since early 2003. They have advised the Afghan police instructors as they in turn have trained more than 40,000 local, border and highway police nationwide. The goal is to train the entire Afghan police force--60,000 officers--by the end of the year.

As difficult as the work is for the advisers and trainers, it's just as tough and dangerous for the Afghan police officers they train. They work 12-hour shifts, live at the station six days a week and face threats to their lives. But new recruits are still enlisting in the police academies. Meanwhile, there are officers like Col. Abdul Khaliq, the District 10 station commander, who has been a policeman for 26 years.

Khaliq says that while low salaries are a big problem for officers, his government has promised to implement pay and rank reform soon. That will guarantee higher pay for officers based on education, training, literacy and experience.

Smith says DI has no way of knowing how many police remained with their departments after the fall of the Taliban. But he says the retention rate is very high for officers who go through the police training program, since they get a significant pay raise and new uniforms upon completion. "The authority figure in this culture also has merit," he says.

"From my experience, they are a pretty motivated group," adds Paul Millen, command chief adviser for the police training component, who has been in Kabul since the program's inception two years ago and is an employee of the British government.

"They have had many years of war and they want their country to be at peace so that they and their families may prosper in a safe community."

Myriad challenges

The biggest problem among the trainees, Millen says, is not their motivation, but the fact that many Afghan police are illiterate. An estimated 70 percent of police officers nationwide cannot read. Literacy rates are higher in the big cities like Kabul. But out of a basic training class of 480 in April, for example, only 80 were literate.

"We weren't expecting to train illiterate officers, but we couldn't walk away from it," Millen says. The trainers developed separate courses for literate and illiterate officers. At the conclusion of their training, the illiterate police still won't be able to record a crime scene report or take down a witness statement, Millen says. But what they can do is "all the things that need bodies and effect a good arrest."

In addition to illiteracy, and the strain that puts on policing, stations in most of the country operate without the most basic necessities.

"There's no electricity. They don't drive. Some of them have guns, but no pens, no paper, none of the basic things you can think of," says Dewayne Barrow, employed by DI as deputy program manager for the police training and advisory program.

In many respects, District 10 is ahead of the game. Only 43 of 328 Afghan police officers

there are illiterate. And the station was fortunate to get donations of computers, bicycles, motorcycles, bullet-proof vests and office supplies from various countries and organizations.

Schauer, for one, finds challenge rather than frustration. His job at District 10 is training the Criminal Investigations Department, bringing officers up to date on investigative techniques such as evidence collection and reporting. He says he can't teach police how to lift fingerprints because they lack the proper equipment. That makes it tough when the bulk of crimes the station investigates are burglaries and robberies.

On the plus side, DI paid a local private computer school to train 10 officers in filing police records, forms, reports, crime statistics and personnel files. All that should help the CID unit, he says.

Schauer is hopeful that the CID unit will progress because "the investigators are more educated than your basic line officer." Usually they have 12 years of education and some police academy experience.

Schauer, who helped start Kosovo's first police domestic violence unit, is helping establish a unit in Kabul at District 10. With the assistance of the U.S. military, the United Nations and some local women's organizations, the new Family Intervention Unit was expected to be operational this month. This despite the attitudes of male officers that it "will never work."

"It's going to be a tough sell here because of the mentality that women are property," Schauer says. "That's sick and that's gotta change." Two American policewomen with DI--one adviser and one trainer--will work along with U.S. military personnel to train two female Afghan police officers for the unit.

District 10 also has made a top priority of community policing--an approach that relies on trust between officers and the neighborhood. Currently, that trust is often nonexistent.

While Afghan citizens complain openly about being beaten up by police for no reason and individual police officers extorting money, those complaints don't usually get reported to the stations, Palmer says. "They don't know if they're going to be victimized by the police or the police are going to actually help them," he says.

Marshall Mosley, an adviser whose specialty is community policing, said the hardest thing to teach Afghan officers is when not to fire their guns.

"If someone takes something like bread or a piece of meat, that's not a crime that warrants you to pull out your weapon and shoot them," he says. "We're trying to get them to understand that no, that's not right."

Community-minded

The community-policing strategy also includes sharpening up the station's foot patrol skills and launching Afghanistan's first organized bicycle and motorcycle patrols. In May, 32 bike cops and six motorcycle officers graduated from technical and community policing training that Palmer led.

Meanwhile, District 10 chief Khaliq has been busy introducing himself to local residents, shopkeepers and schoolteachers. He transferred in March from his paper-pushing job as chief of the Kabul customs department, which is regarded as a police agency.

"The relations between the police and the people were bad, but right now the people are supporting the police," he says. "They are even inviting the police to their special occasions, like wedding parties."

While Khaliq goes about in his community unarmed, he's not naive about the dangers of being a police officer. The shooting that district police took off to investigate on that day in April

turned out to be the slaying of two officers from another jurisdiction. That same week brought a spate of attacks on police by the Taliban. And last month, several police officers were killed during violent anti-American protests that broke out over a report that U.S. guards at the Guantanamo Bay detention center in Cuba had desecrated the Quran.

"It again illustrates the fact that it is still dangerous here for all. We are hoping that police will not become the obvious target here as in Iraq," DI's Barrow says.

DI staff members still find themselves dealing with "bad guy" police commanders who remain entrenched in their positions. They hope that the Afghan police command staff will identify the commanders who are crooks and either discharge them or force them to adopt new ways.

They also believe the police training and advising is slowly changing things like police corruption.

"We've had students come back to us and say, 'I went back to my chief and my chief wanted me to go out and shake down people at traffic stops. I wouldn't do it, and he beat me for it,' " says Brian Cox, employed by DI as the Kabul regional commander for the police training and advisory program. "The ideas are getting across to them. ... They want to stick to their training. We're trying to help as much as we can."

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