



Inter Press Service News Agency

THE STORY UNDERNEATH

Friday, November 30, 2007 01:00 GMT

[Latest News](#)[Contact Us](#)[Readers' Opinions](#)[Search](#)**AFGHANISTAN:****Teaching Counterinsurgency - Too Little, Too Late**

Fawzia Sheikh

KABUL, Nov 27 (IPS) - The Afghanistan Counterinsurgency Academy is a work in progress -- the clamour of construction, the bulldozing of garbage and the sparse staff are all clear signs.

Built on a former Canadian military base near the bullet-ridden palace of Afghanistan's former royal family, the COIN Academy, as it is known, is on the verge of acquiring a dining facility, a lecture hall and other services.

"The academy is still in survival mode," U.S. army Maj. Luke Meyers, the academy's operations chief, told IPS. "We're trying to build this as fast as we can but it's taking time. We're six years behind really, to be honest. We're glad we've made this step at least."

Following pressure from top American military officials, the COIN Academy opened in April nearly six years after the invasion of Afghanistan while a counterpart school in Iraq was established in 2005. Afghanistan's facility recently shifted to its new location on the outskirts of Kabul.

The nature of the fight in Afghanistan is described as a counterinsurgency, the kind of conflict American soldiers have not faced since the war in Vietnam. This brand of warfare is defined as the combined "military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency," according to a manual on the subject issued by the U.S. military last year.

Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side wants civilians to accept its governance or authority as legitimate, the manual states. The document goes on to say that counterinsurgency is a complex form of warfare that seeks the population's support by offering protection and services like water and medical care, among other things.

The school aims to teach counterinsurgency practices to newly arrived Western trainers sent to embed with the Afghan security forces, as well as to coalition forces and to senior members of the Afghan military, police and intelligence services.

But is it a useful effort at this stage in the war? Policy makers interviewed in Washington seem to think so.

"I guess it would fall under the heading of better later than never," said U.S. Congressman Adam Smith, an opposition member and chairman of a congressional subcommittee on terrorism, unconventional threats and capabilities.

Smith rejects the notion that the academy's creation suggests that the Bush administration is paying more attention to the war in Afghanistan.

"We're not increasing troop levels there. We are still behind the game in terms of providing the money, operating infrastructure, support. So however much they want to pay attention to Afghanistan . . . 80 percent of our military assets are still committed to Iraq," he told IPS.

Lawrence Korb, a senior fellow at the Centre for American Progress, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, said the COIN Academy must succeed.

Dismissing the idea Iraq is the central front in the war against terrorism, he said, "This is where the attacks came

from. This is where al-Qaeda central has reconstituted itself. I've rarely ever seen such a botched opportunity. Now, hopefully, it's not too late."

He said operating the school, however, should be part of a multi-faceted counterinsurgency approach that calls for the addition of 20,000 extra troops redirected from Iraq, a re-evaluated counter-narcotics strategy, better-funded and managed reconstruction goals and increased U.S. pressure on Pakistan to be a more reliable partner in fighting insurgents.

In one indication Washington recognises the significance of the international fight in Afghanistan, President George W. Bush intends to redirect some funding earmarked for Afghan army training to police training. The police force has long been a second priority as the army's role in securing the country's borders and fighting insurgents took front and centre.

Despite some positive signs, back at the COIN Academy, Meyers, the operations chief, laments his team's requisite "sales job of fighting for money and resourcing" while the U.S. government is so focused on fuelling the Iraq war machine.

The academy received one million US dollars upon standing up this year but is lobbying for an annual budget of 7-9 million dollars to spend on paying instructors and building infrastructure.

"It's taking a while for the word to get out," Meyers said about the school. He added that he and his colleagues are still trying to gain the support of key players in the U.S. government.

The COIN Academy shares lessons garnered on the battlefield with its Iraq counterpart and with military learning centers in the U.S.

In another year, Meyers told IPS, his team hopes Afghan officers will join the staff.

The cornerstone of the academy is a five-day leaders' course that so far has taught 400 students. The curriculum includes information about the conflict's key participants (including countries and coalitions), advice on operating in Afghanistan, details about ethnic and tribal concerns in various regions and the history of attacks, violence and threats across the country, he said.

He said students are given a handbook in English, Dari and Pashto to help carry out missions, and which can be taken onto the battlefield instead of a laptop computer.

During each course, academy staff brings in 80 - 100 students and divides them into groups focusing on each of the country's five regions, explained Myers. He said embedded Western trainers arrive in the country and spend time with Afghan army and police from the area to which they will be assigned.

"There's a benefit (to) them of living, eating and studying together," a practice not followed at the Iraq COIN Academy, he continued. "Most of the learning actually takes place outside of the classroom, whether its language, cultural, just general questions about Afghanistan."

Meyers went on to relate a story illustrating the advantages of Westerners and Afghans working together. In one of the earlier courses, he said, instructors presented the group with a particular scenario about one of the country's regions.

An American officer confidently replied: "Here's the answer. Problem solved. Class is over," Meyers recalled.

But an Afghan officer disputed the response, telling his American counterpart he had not considered certain issues like the fact the mountains are in the east, the language is Dari, not Pashto, and the region has electricity for only three hours a day, he explained.

"Everyone doesn't know everything. It's not just U.S.-led. It takes time to understand what everyone can bring to the table," concluded Meyers, adding that most senior Afghan officers have operated in a counterinsurgency environment longer than any U.S. soldier.

(*Fawzia Sheikh was recently embedded with U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Interviews for this story were carried out in Afghanistan and the U.S.)

(END/2007)

[Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [Subscription](#) | [News in RSS](#) | [Email News](#) | [Mobile](#) | [Text Only](#)
Copyright © 2007 IPS-Inter Press Service. All rights reserved.