

## U.S. targets illiteracy among Afghan forces

By Andrew Tilghman - Staff writer  
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The U.S. military is mounting a massive effort to help teach Afghan soldiers and police to read after concluding that literacy is “the essential enabler” to the local security forces’ success.

“How do you expect a soldier to account for their weapon if they can’t even read the serial number?” said Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, head of the NATO-led effort to train the Afghan national security forces.

“It’s really challenging for some people to fully appreciate just how illiterate most of this population is,” Caldwell said. “It doesn’t mean they don’t have street sense and they’re not smart in many ways. But they don’t have the education ... to look at a series of numbers and be able to read it.”

The literacy rate for incoming Afghan army and police recruits is about 14 percent to 18 percent, Caldwell said.

His training command is hiring up to 1,000 literate Afghans to help that country’s soldiers learn to read. About 27,000 Afghan police and army recruits are now taking literacy courses, a number that could grow to 100,000 by spring, Caldwell said.

The training command was created nine months ago to jump-start flagging efforts to create a reliable army and police force, which are seen as essential to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and a drawdown of U.S. forces there.

Previous efforts from 2005 through 2009 were “slow, halting and uncoordinated,” often placing quantity over quality, he said. Now, however, a new focus on literacy, along with reduced attrition, is showing “measured progress,” he said.

Caldwell expects to meet the target of growing Afghan military and police forces from the current 250,000 to about 306,000 by October 2011.

Recognizing the importance of literacy has been essential to that progress, Caldwell told reporters at the Pentagon in an Aug. 23 teleconference from Afghanistan.

“Had you asked me last November when we were starting the NATO Training Mission, ‘Hey, is literacy important?’ ... my philosophy was, ‘Hey, look, we’re here to train soldiers and policemen. If they want some literacy, they can do it on their own, but that’s not what we’re here to do,’ ” Caldwell said.

“But ... what we have found, if we’re going to professionalize this force, we have to take on literacy,” he said.

That is no small challenge. Literacy rates in Afghanistan are among the lowest in the world. Only about 28 percent of Afghans over age 15 can read and write, according to a report by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

By comparison, in Iraq about 74 percent of the men and women over age 15 can read and write, according to the CIA.

Teaching illiterate Afghans to read is a mission that stretches far beyond traditional military goals, said Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst with the Cato Institute in Washington.

“This is extremely ambitious for us to undertake such a massive social engineering scheme,” she said. “This calls for a very long-term strategy, and we must ask ... do we have the patience to carry [out] such a long program?”

Yet she agreed that it is difficult to build a police force with men who cannot take a witness statement or fill out an arrest report.

Caldwell stressed the literacy effort’s limited goals.

“We’re not trying to make high-school graduates. Our intent is to give them enough so that they have the ability to do certain key things for the professionalization of the force — bring them up perhaps to a first-grade, third-grade level,” he said.

“If they are issued equipment and they are told they are supposed to have four shirts and three pairs of pants and two boots on a piece of paper,” he said, it’s important that “they can actually read that and then look at the equipment” instead of relying on someone else to do that for them.

“Literacy combats corruption within the Afghan National Security Force,”

9/7/2010

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Caldwell said. "Literacy prevents bad actors from preying on the illiterate. When the force is literate, standards can be published and everyone can be held accountable to adhere to them, up the chain of command as well as down."