

Elite Guards Ready for Duty

Author: [IWPR](#)

Highly-trained Afghan troops prepare to protect the life of their president.

The first recruits in an elite force of Afghan bodyguards, trained by Americans to take over from them in guarding against further attempts on the life of President Hamed Karzai, have graduated after seven weeks of gruelling training.

The 52 men, the first batch of a planned unit of 300, will take over from US guards as soon as their number reaches 150, according to presidency spokesman Sayed Fazl Akbar.

“They must be educated, they must not be recommended by anyone, and they will be guarding the life of the head of state now and in the future,” he told IWPR. The guards will receive higher pay than other soldiers and members of the security forces, though it was not clear how much higher.

Karzai asked for American bodyguards after his deputy Abdul Qadir, like the president one of the few ethnic Pashtuns in a government dominated by Tajiks, was assassinated last July, shot dead by two gunmen as he was leaving his office in central Kabul.

Only a few weeks later, Karzai himself was the target for an assassination attempt in the southern city of Kandahar when a gunman dressed in a security force uniform emerged from a crowd greeting the Afghan president.

Karzai’s US bodyguards shot and killed the gunman and two other men, both carrying weapons.

The attempt came on the same day as a car bomb in the centre of Kabul killed 22 people, representing the most serious challenge to Karzai’s leadership since he took over following the collapse of the hard line Taleban regime over a year ago.

The US government insisted at the time that the installation of American bodyguards was a short-term measure. “What that means, whether it’s weeks or months or several months, I don’t know,” Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said, adding that it was important “that the Afghan people not have an interruption in their leadership...it’s a very straightforward issue”.

Roger King, a spokesman for thousands of US troops stationed in Afghanistan to track down and fight remnants of al-Qaeda and Taleban forces

and dissident Islamic guerrillas who have joined up with them, told IWPR, “When Karzai was asked whether he wanted American guards permanently, he replied that if Afghans were trained to the same level as Americans, he would prefer to have them.”

Like recruits to a new national army currently being formed, the guards are drawn from all 32 provinces of Afghanistan. This is clearly aimed at often-voiced criticism, particularly from the country’s majority Pashtun community, that the current military and security forces are dominated by ethnic Tajiks from the north who make up only 25 per cent of the population, but who played a leading role in the fight against the Pashtun Taleban.

The creation of a national army is seen as crucial for the success of the new, democratic Afghan government after 23 years of war, enabling the state to confront powerful warlords who rule large parts of the country, collecting fortunes from illegal checkpoints and refusing to heed orders from Kabul.

“These men are drawn from across Afghanistan, with 10 coming from each province,” Khaleeq Ahmad, the head of international relations in the presidency office, told IWPR. “They must be aged between 18 and 40, and be high school graduates.”

General Sultan Mohammad Ibadi, commander of the Presidential Guard, said, “These guards will become military officers, and will have the same privileges as other military officers, but will be attached to the national security department. The only difference is that they will be better paid than other military officers.”

No one would be drawn on how much that pay will be. During training they receive 300 dollars a month from the US army – a huge amount in a country where the average wage is around 600 dollars a year – but after completing their course they will be paid by the government.

For obvious reasons, both sides were also reticent on exactly what was involved in their training. “The training of these guards is different from that of national army soldiers, that’s why these people are not selected from them. I can’t give you any more information,” King told IWPR.

One of the new recruits Abdul Qahar, 22, from Logar province just south of Kabul, said, “We have been trained by the American officers for 53 days and have learned different techniques for safeguarding the president. For instance, we have learned first aid, teambuilding, physical fitness, shooting, driving and self-defence.” Questioned on specific details, he refused to elaborate.

As to what the new recruits can expect, the security situation in Kabul at least, where 4,500 international troops are stationed, is relatively quiet after a spate of incidents late last year and early this year, including a grenade attack on a US vehicle in the centre of the city in which two American soldiers were injured and what appeared to be a suicide attack aimed at two French journalists which killed two Afghans accompanying them.

However, the threat is still there. Earlier this year, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an Islamic guerrilla leader who helped drive out Soviet troops in 1989 but then turned on other mujahedin leaders, declared that he had linked up with remnants of the Al-Qaeda terrorist group and Taliban forces and declared a “jihad” against foreign troops in the country.

Mohammad Naseem Shafaq is a freelance journalist in Kabul

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

Focus: [Afghanistan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/elite-guards-ready-duty>