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Distrust Slows U.S. Training of Pakistanis

By **ERIC SCHMITT** and **JANE PERLEZ**

WARSAK, Pakistan — The recent graduation ceremony here for Pakistani troops trained by Americans to fight the **Taliban** and **Al Qaeda** was intended as show of fresh cooperation between the Pakistani and American militaries. But it said as much about its limitations.

Nearly 250 Pakistani paramilitary troops in khaki uniforms and green berets snapped to attention, with top students accepting a certificate from an American Army colonel after completing the specialized training for snipers and platoon and company leaders.

But this new center, 20 miles from the **Afghanistan** border, was built to train as many as 2,000 soldiers at a time. The largest component of the American-financed instruction — a 10-week basic-training course — is months behind schedule, officials from both sides acknowledge, in part because Pakistani commanders say they cannot afford to send troops for new training as fighting intensifies in the border areas.

Pakistan also restricts the number of American trainers throughout the country to no more than about 120 Special Operations personnel, fearful of being identified too closely with the unpopular United States — even though the Americans reimburse Pakistan more than \$1 billion a year for its military operations in the border areas. “We want to keep a low signature,” said a senior Pakistani officer.

The deep suspicion that underlies every American move here is a fact of life that American officers say they must work through as they try to reverse the effects of the many years when the United States had cut Pakistan off from military aid because of its **nuclear weapons** program.

That time of estrangement, which lasted through the 1990s, left the Pakistanis feeling scorned and abandoned by the United States, and its military distant and seeded with officers and soldiers sympathetic to conservative Islam — and even at times the very militants they are today charged with fighting.

Today the American-led war in Afghanistan and its continuing campaign of **drone** strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas have made the United States suspect at all levels of the military, and among the Pakistani population, as anti-Americanism has hit new heights. This training program is among the first steps to repair that relationship. "This is the most complex operating environment I've ever dealt with," said Col. Kurt Sonntag, a **West Point** graduate who handed out the graduation certificates here.

Such are the limits on the Americans that dozens of Pakistani enlisted "master trainers," taught by the Americans, do the bulk of the hands-on instruction here. Since January 2009, about 1,000 scouts from Pakistan's Frontier Corps have completed the training, which is designed to help turn the 58,000-member paramilitary force that patrols the tribal areas from a largely passive border force into skilled and motivated fighters.

The personnel training is just one piece of what is now a multipronged relationship. With combating Al Qaeda and the Taliban now the overriding priority, the United States provides Pakistan with a wide array of weapons, shares intelligence about the militants, and has given it more than \$10 billion toward the cost of deploying nearly 150,000 troops in and around the border areas since 2001 — with the promise of much more to come.

On June 27, the United States delivered to Pakistan the first of three new F-16 jet fighters equipped with precision targeting instruments for day and night use. A half dozen **United States Air Force** pilots traveled here to train and qualify Pakistani aviators on night operations.

Washington is stressing that these upgraded fighters will be used by Pakistan against the militants in the tribal areas, but they also augment the F-16 fleet that the United States has financed over the years as part of the country's arsenal that is directed against India.

By urging Pakistan to embrace counterinsurgency training, the United States is trying to steer the Pakistani Army toward spending more resources against what Washington believes is Pakistan's main enemy, the Taliban and Al Qaeda, rather than devoting almost the entire military effort against India, American officials said. Central to this approach is an array of training that the Americans tailor to what Pakistani says it needs for the Frontier Corps, its conventional army and its Special Operations forces.

About a dozen American trainers are assigned to yearlong duty at this training center, a cluster of classrooms and dormitories and adjacent training ranges on a large campus, which the United States spent \$23 million to build, plus another \$30 million for training and equipment requested by the Pakistani military.

The most gifted Frontier Corps marksmen are selected for sniper training, a skill in need

against the Taliban who have been using Russian-made Dragonov sniper rifles to deadly effect against the Pakistani Army.

Five two-man sniper teams, trained to use American-made M24 rifles as well as how to work with a spotter, measure wind speeds and camouflage their positions, received awards from Colonel Sonntag. But five two-man teams were dropped during the training because their math skills were not good enough, another American trainer said.

Much of the training here is aimed at building the confidence of the Frontier Corps scouts, some of whom have relatives in the Taliban, and who speak the same language, Pashto, as many militants. Often the militants are better armed and more handsomely paid than the scouts.

Three basic skills were built into the course, one of the American trainers said: How to shoot straight, how to administer battlefield first aid, and how to provide covering fire for advancing troops.

Until a few years ago, the Frontier Corps was widely ridiculed as corrupt and incompetent. But under the leadership of Maj. Gen. Tariq Khan, salaries have quadrupled to about \$200 a month, new equipment is flowing in, and the scouts are winning praise in combat. Still, General Khan acknowledged in an interview that the training here was still “settling down and maturing.”

The scouts face a battle-hardened enemy that has lived in the mountains around here for decades. “We’ve been here one-and-a-half years,” said Col. Ahsan Raza, the training center’s commandant. “They have been preparing for the last 20 years.”

The Pakistani Army also conducts training on its own without direct American aid. At the Pabbi Hills training center, halfway between Islamabad and Lahore, a visitor drives up a rutted dirt road, past clusters of troop tents pitched amid acacia trees, to a sprawling, 2,500-acre series of ranges and obstacle courses.

Every Pakistani Army unit assigned to the fight in the country’s tribal belt now receives at least four weeks of training in what the Pakistani Army calls “low-intensity conflict.”

Atop a 30-foot-high observation tower that doubles as a rappelling wall, Maj. Shaukat Hayat, second in command of the 55 Baloch Regiment, a 700-man infantry unit, oversees as his troops drill in how to clear a militant’s house. A billowing white smoke grenade offers advancing forces cover as they go room to room, exchanging gunfire with mock militants.

A Pakistani trainer stands on a walkway above the roofless rooms that allows him to observe and grade the troops’ performance. “When they’re done, they’ll go back and review what they

did, and do it again,” said Major Hayat, 36.

The instructors are veterans of the campaigns in the tribal areas. Troops conduct live-fire drills on outdoor ranges with popup targets of militants. Similar drills at indoor ranges have paper targets with pictures of guerrillas and civilians, testing the troops’ split-second skills to judge friend or foe under fire.

But simulating the fight with the militants goes only so far, Pakistani officers say.

“It’s good textbook training, but the final training has to take place on the ground and must deal with the idea of a bullet coming at you,” said Lt. Gen. Asif Yasin Malik, who commands all Pakistani forces in the tribal areas. “After that first encounter, it’s done. They’re O.K.”