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Soldier Deaths Draw Focus to U.S. in Pakistan

By [JANE PERLEZ](#)

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — The deaths of three American soldiers in a [Taliban](#) suicide attack on Wednesday lifted the veil on United States military assistance to [Pakistan](#) that the authorities here would like to keep quiet and the Americans, as the donors, chafe at not receiving credit for.

The soldiers were among at least 60 to 100 members of a Special Operations team that [trains Pakistan's paramilitary Frontier Corps](#) in counterinsurgency techniques, including intelligence gathering and development assistance. The American service members are from the [Special Operations Command](#) of Adm. Eric T. Olson.

At least 12 other American service members have been killed in Pakistan since Sept. 11, 2001, in hotel bombings and a plane crash, according to the United States Central Command, but these were the first killed as part of the Special Operations training, which has been under way for 18 months.

That training has been acknowledged only gingerly by both the Americans and the Pakistanis, but has deliberately been kept low-key so as not to trespass onto Pakistani sensitivities about sovereignty, and not to further inflame high anti-American sentiment.

Even though the United States calls Pakistan an ally, the country, unlike Afghanistan and Iraq, has not allowed American combat forces to operate here, a point that is stressed by the Pentagon and the Pakistani Army, the most powerful institution in Pakistan.

Instead, the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) operates what has become the main American weapon in Pakistan, the [drones](#) armed with missiles that have struck with [increasing intensity](#) against militants with the Taliban and [Al Qaeda](#) in the lawless tribal areas.

The American soldiers were probably made targets as a result of the drone strikes, said Syed Rifaat Hussain, professor of international relations at Islamabad University. "The attack seems a payback for the mounting frequency of the drone attacks," Professor Hussain said.

If the American soldiers were the targets, the attack raised the question of whether the Taliban had received intelligence or cooperation from within the Frontier Corps.

The three soldiers were killed, and two other service members wounded, in the region of Lower Dir, which is close to the tribal areas. According to police officials in the region, the armored vehicle in which they were traveling was hit by a suicide bomber driving a car. Earlier reports from Pakistani security officials said the soldiers had been killed by a roadside explosive device.

To disguise themselves in a way that is common for Western men in Pakistan, the American soldiers were dressed in traditional Pakistani garb of baggy trousers and long tunic, known as shalwar kameez, according to a Frontier Corps officer. They also wore local caps that helped cover their hair, he said.

Their armored vehicle was equipped with electronic jammers sufficient to block remotely controlled devices and mines, the officer said. Vehicles driven by the Frontier Corps were placed in front and behind the Americans as protection, he said.

Still, the Taliban bomber was able to penetrate their cordon. In all 131 people were wounded, most of them girls who were students at a high school adjacent to the site of the suicide attack, the Lower Dir police said.

The soldiers were en route to the opening of a girls school that had been rebuilt with American money, the United States Embassy said in a statement. The school was destroyed by the Taliban last year as they swept through Lower Dir and the nearby [Swat Valley](#), where a battle raged for months between the Pakistani Army and the Taliban.

A spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban called reporters hours after the attack against the Americans and claimed that his group was responsible.

The Pakistani Army currently occupies Swat, and in an effort to strengthen the civilian institutions there and in Dir, some of the American service members on the Special Operations team have been quietly working on development projects, an American official said.

The presence of the American military members in an area known to be threaded with Taliban militants would also raise questions, said Khalid Aziz, a former chief secretary of the North-West Frontier Province, which includes Swat and Dir.

Mr. Aziz said it was odd that American soldiers would go to such a volatile area where Taliban militants were known to be prevalent even though the Pakistani security forces insisted that they had been flushed out.

The usual practice for development work in Dir and Swat called for Pakistani aid workers or paramilitary soldiers to visit the sites, he said.

The Americans' involvement in training Frontier Corps recruits in development assistance was little known until Wednesday's attack.

"People are going to be very suspicious," said Mr. Aziz, who is now involved in American assistance projects elsewhere. "There is going to be big blowback in the media."

An American development official said that encouraging the Frontier Corps to become expert in humanitarian aid was an important part of the trainers' counterinsurgency curriculum.

Last summer, for example, the American military trainers helped distribute food and water in camps for the more than one million people displaced from the Swat Valley by the fighting, the official said. But that American assistance, too, was kept quiet.

The 500,000-strong Pakistani Army led by Gen. [Ashfaq Parvez Kayani](#), the standard-bearer of Pakistan's

strong sense of nationalism, is resistant to the appearance of overt military assistance, least of all from the unpopular Americans, that would make the army look less than self-reliant on the battlefield.

Over the last several years, as the Qaeda-backed insurgents increased their hold on Pakistan's tribal areas and used their base to attack American and [NATO](#) forces in Afghanistan, the United States military asked for permission for combat soldiers to operate in the tribal zone, according to American officials. Pakistan rebuffed the requests, they said.

Whether American soldiers are based in Pakistan is often raised by Pakistani politicians, students and average Pakistanis, many of them suspicious of American motives.

The question of the presence of American soldiers in Pakistan is also prompted by the fact that the American military provides important equipment to the Pakistani Army, including F-16 fighter jets, Cobra attack helicopters and howitzers.

Capt. Jack Hanzlik, a spokesman for the United States Central Command in Tampa, Fla., said 12 other service members had been killed in Pakistan since Sept. 11, 2001. The three soldiers who died Wednesday had been assigned to a Special Operations command in Pakistan. But he said they were not commandos from the elite Delta Force or Special Forces, also known as the Green Berets. The United States has about 200 military service members in Pakistan, Captain Hanzlik said.

The three names of the soldiers killed were not released Wednesday because United States military officials were still notifying the next of kin.

Reporting was contributed by Ismail Khan from Peshawar, Pakistan; Pir Zubair Shah from Islamabad; and Elisabeth Bumiller and Eric Schmitt from Washington.

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