

Britain to train Pakistan's Frontier Corps troops in Baluchistan

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Britain is building a training camp for Pakistan's paramilitary Frontier Corps in the southwestern province of Baluchistan in an effort to combat the Taleban presence around the porous border with southern Afghanistan, The Times has learned.

Britain also plans to deploy 24 army trainers at the camp for three years from August 2010, when construction work is scheduled to finish, according to a senior official at the British High Commission in Islamabad.

The British personnel will work with six American trainers at the camp, which is designed to house 550 people. It will train 360 Frontier Corps (FC) soldiers at a time, on 12-week courses, the official said.

The plan is politically sensitive because the British and US trainers will be the first foreign forces formally stationed in Baluchistan since Pakistan's independence in 1947, although US special forces operated there during the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

The development coincides with a surge in US troop levels in southern Afghanistan, and US threats to start CIA drone strikes in Baluchistan if Pakistan does not act against Afghan Taleban leaders who, US officials believe, are sheltering in Quetta, the provincial capital. It is also historically resonant for Britain, which founded the FC in 1907 to control rebellious tribes on the North West Frontier, and used to recruit and train troops for the army in Baluchistan, many of whom fought in the two world wars.

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The camp is part of a joint programme launched last year with the US to boost the capacity of the FC, which still patrols the Afghan border and is still recruited from Pashtun, Baluch and other tribes living there, as was the case in the days of the British Raj.

The 60,000-strong unit is technically part of the Interior Ministry but officers are seconded from the army and its head is traditionally an army general. It played a key role in this year's campaign against the Taleban around the northwestern region of Swat.

US officials had pushed for the programme for years, frustrated by the FC's lack of training and equipment, and the army's poor counterinsurgency capability and its preoccupation with India.

Pakistan admits that some Afghan Taleban leaders visit Quetta but denies that they are based there. It says it cannot do more to arrest them nor move more troops to Baluchistan because they are needed in the northwest or on the Indian border. It is especially sensitive

about Baluchistan because it has been fighting a separatist insurgency there for decades.

Pakistan finally agreed to a “train the trainers” programme last year and, since then, six British trainers have been working alongside as many as 30 Americans at an FC centre in northwestern Pakistan. The Americans are running and funding the training there while Britain takes the lead in Baluchistan. The precise location of the Baluchistan camp cannot be disclosed for security reasons but the land has been allotted, plans have been approved and the first bricks are about to be laid.

The first to undergo a 12-week course there will be 120 FC junior commanders — roughly equivalent to corporals in the British army — some of whom will then become the main training staff at the camp.

The foreign trainers will stay on at the camp to mentor the FC junior commanders as they train colleagues to teach the same skills to as many as possible of the 30,000 FC troops in Baluchistan.

They will learn basic skills such as how to deal with an improvised explosive device, how to man a checkpoint and search a vehicle, how to handle light weapons and how to perform first aid. Officers will learn counterinsurgency command and leadership skills.

Britain will provide equipment, including helmets, boots and body armour. The plan is to transfer the camp to the FC after three years but the programme could be prolonged if Pakistan requests it and if funding can be found.

The British budget for the Baluchistan camp is 12.6 million pounds, including construction, but excluding the wages of the British personnel.

A figure for the American budget was not immediately available, but the US has already given the FC equipment worth \$43.8 million (27 million pounds), including helmets and bulletproof vests, and has promised armoured vehicles. It recently set up a Pakistan Counter-insurgency Capability Fund, which has earmarked \$1.1 billion for training and equipping counter-terrorist forces, including the FC, in 2009 and 2010.

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