

Press and “Psy Ops” to merge at NATO Afghan Headquarters: sources

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KABUL (Reuters) - The U.S. general commanding NATO forces in Afghanistan has ordered a merger of the office that releases news with “Psy Ops,” which deals with propaganda, a move that goes against the alliance’s policy, three officials said.

The move has worried Washington’s European NATO allies — Germany has already threatened to pull out of media operations in Afghanistan — and the officials said it could undermine the credibility of information released to the public.

Seven years into the war against the Taliban, insurgent influence is spreading closer to the capital and Afghans are becoming increasingly disenchanted at the presence of some 65,000 foreign troops and the government of President Hamid Karzai.

Taliban militants, through their website, telephone text messages and frequent calls to reporters, are also gaining ground in the information war, analysts say.

U.S. General David McKiernan, the commander of 50,000 troops from more than 40 nations in NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), ordered the combination of the Public Affairs Office (PAO), Information Operations and Psy Ops (Psychological Operations) from December 1, said a NATO official with detailed knowledge of the move.

“This will totally undermine the credibility of the information released to the press and the public,” said the official, who declined to be named.

ISAF spokesman Brigadier General Richard Blanchette said McKiernan had issued a staff order to implement a command restructure from December 1 which was being reviewed by NATO headquarters in Brussels, but he declined to go into details of the reorganization.

“This is very much an internal matter,” he said. “This is up with higher headquarters right now and we’re waiting to get the basic approval. Once we have the approval we will be going into implementation.”

But another ISAF official confirmed that the amalgamation of public affairs with Information Operations and Psy Ops was part of the planned command restructure. This official, who also declined to be named, said the merger had caused considerable concern at higher levels within NATO which had challenged the order by the U.S. general.

“DECEPTION ACTIVITIES”

NATO policy recognizes there is an inherent clash of interests between its public affairs offices, whose job it is to issue press releases and answer media questions, and that of Information Operations and Psy Ops.

Information Operations advises on information designed to affect the will of the enemy, while Psy Ops includes so-called “black operations,” or outright deception.

While Public Affairs and Information Operations, PA and Info Ops in military jargon, “are separate, but related functions,” according to the official NATO policy document on public affairs, “PA is not an Info Ops discipline.”

The new combined ISAF department will come under the command of an American one-star general reporting directly to McKiernan, an arrangement that is also against NATO policy, the NATO official said.

“While coordination is essential, the lines of authority will remain separate, the PA reporting directly to the commander. This is to maintain credibility of PA and to avoid creating a media or public perception that PA activities are coordinated by, or are directed by, Info Ops,” the NATO policy document says.

“PA will have no role in planning or executing Info Ops, Psy Ops, or deception activities,” it states.

The United States has 35,000 of the 65,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, operating both under ISAF and a separate U.S.-led coalition operation, but both come under McKiernan’s command.

Washington is already scheduled to send another 3,000 troops to arrive in the country in January and is now considering sending 20,000 more troops in the next 12 to 18 months, further tipping the numerical balance among ISAF forces.

“What we are seeing is a gradual increase of American influence in all areas of the war,” the NATO official said. “Seeking to gain total control of the information flow from the campaign is just part of that.”

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