

U.S. officials say CIA runs elite Afghan fighting force

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Paramilitaries are being used in ramped-up American counter-terror operations against the Taliban

By KIMBERLY DOZIER and ADAM GOLDMAN, Associated Press

The CIA has trained and bankrolled a well-paid force of elite Afghan paramilitaries for nearly eight years to hunt al-Qaida and the Taliban for the CIA, according to current and former U.S. officials.

Modeled after U.S. special forces, the Counterterrorist Pursuit Team was set up in the months following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 to penetrate territory controlled by the Taliban and al-Qaida and target militants for interrogations by CIA officials.

The 3,000-strong Afghan teams are used for surveillance and long-range reconnaissance missions and some have trained at CIA facilities in the United States. The force has operated in Kabul and some of Afghanistan's most violence-wracked provinces including Kandahar, Khost, Paktia and Paktika, according to a security professional familiar with the program.

The security official and former intelligence officials spoke about the Afghan force on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the sensitive information.

The secret Afghan force has emerged as a new component of ramped-up American counter-terror operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan and against al-Qaida and allies over the mountainous border in Pakistan. The U.S. military, including special operations forces, has been working with the CIA in an intensified crackdown against militants on both sides of the border.

Drone strikes run by the CIA are at their highest level yet against Afghan Taliban, Haqqani and al-Qaida leaders in Pakistan, while U.S. special operations forces have been staging combined raids with Afghan army special forces against the midlevel leadership that operates on the Afghan side.

The Afghan pursuit teams were described in detail in Bob Woodward's new book, "Obama's Wars," due out Monday.

Woodward reported that the units conducted covert operations inside neighboring Pakistan's lawless border areas as part of a campaign against al-Qaida and Taliban havens.

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