

# **Inside the Pentagon**

## ***U.S. Preparing To Solicit Bids on Biometrics Database in Afghanistan***

By Fawzia Sheikh

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While a Pentagon effort to create a biometrics database for coalition forces operating in Afghanistan has not been officially endorsed by NATO's leadership, the United States is preparing to issue a solicitation to industry and an alliance working group has been set up to chart the way forward, according to a former defense official.

The initiative is meant to assist with carrying out tasks like peacekeeping missions, countering improvised explosive devices and protecting International Security Assistance Force member countries by ensuring individuals whose fingerprints are found on improvised bombs are not working on coalition troop bases, as Afghan security force members or listed on ISAF countries' criminal watch lists, the former defense official told Inside the Pentagon.

The multimillion-dollar database, known as ISAF-ABIS (Automated Biometric Identification System), will be similar to one set up years ago in Iraq that collects the facial, fingerprint and iris scans of the Iraqi national police to prevent potential bomb makers from entering U.S. military bases, a U.S. Central Command official told ITP last fall (ITP, Nov. 12, 2009, p.1).

ISAF is looking at two initiatives, the former defense official said this week: putting the database into theater to support current operations and standing up a NATO capability.

The Pentagon is moving forward with a solicitation package explaining the requirement that is linked to current Afghanistan operations and is seeking vendors to help build the database, maintained the former defense official, noting that NATO countries will be able to bid on the ISAF-ABIS effort when it becomes an official alliance capability.

The package will likely amount to about \$20 million to \$30 million, including two years of operations and maintenance money, in the form of a "voluntary, national contribution" by the United States to ISAF, added the former official. It will take about four months to have the database reach initial operating capability.

During the two years, the alliance will probably "run it through as a NATO program, identify funding sources, then pick up the O&M tail," and recomplete the operations and maintenance portion through a NATO contract, said the former official.

Coalition involvement is important because France, for instance, probably has its own watch list of "Moroccan or Algerian natives who are in Paris, who are on their police watch list for criminal activity," explained the former defense official.

"Well, DOD typically doesn't see that, but is there a possibility that those guys are in Afghanistan training?" said the former defense official. "Absolutely. So why not add that French watch list to the ISAF-ABIS database, and add the German watch list, and add the Polish and Spanish watch lists? And all that information will reside in that database, again, anonymous[ly] until there's a match with a terrorist attack."

A Pentagon group consisting of policy, intelligence, biometrics task force and combatant command officials outlined the proposal earlier this year to the intelligence branch (J-2) of NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), the alliance's defense investment division, NATO Allied Command Transformation, and Task Force 435, which is responsible for detention operations in Afghanistan, the former defense official said. All three NATO and U.S. military organizations have approved the idea but the top NATO leadership has not yet signed off, said the former defense official.

NATO ACT, moreover, has recently included biometrics in its counter-IED action plan, added the former official.

NATO's SHAPE J-2 directorate set up a working group including the member-country representatives in February to address the national caveats of ISAF countries, which are primarily related to privacy, the former defense official noted. It is expected to meet for the first time this month.

"Outside of the U.S., the collection of biometrics has always been associated with criminal events. So they think of it in law-enforcement terms and all of the protections that come associated with it," explained the former official. As a result, these countries must overcome a "hurdle" of seeing military forces undertake this task in theater in connection to counter-IED activities and a counterinsurgency effort, added the former defense official.

Each ISAF member is "worried about what if some country collects biometrics on an unknown individual and it turns out he's one of ours?" explained the former official, adding that nations fighting in Afghanistan are concerned about protecting that citizen's privacy. "So you've got 44 countries looking at that issue."

U.S. forces have collected biometrics information on 3.5 million people in Iraq and Afghanistan, but "thousands upon thousands of biometrics matches...were benign" and "led to nothing," the former defense official noted.

One proposed solution to this hindrance is to separate biometrics data like fingerprints, photos and iris scans, from the other data subject to privacy like an individual's name, residence, sex and nationality, said the former defense official, adding that coalition forces would only look at personal information like name and age "when there's a match to an event like an IED event or a sniper attack."

When fingerprints and other biometrics details are "separated from the contextual information . . . they don't lead you to any kind of conclusion.

. . . It's only when you link it to the contextual information, that people start to have concerns," noted the former official.

Under this proposal, the 44 forces will have "lock and key" over the personal information in the database, the former defense official told ITP, adding that the countries "seem to be willing to discuss biometrics" with this revised plan in mind. About "a dozen or so" ISAF members today would probably be ready to contribute to the database in Afghanistan, including the United States, Canada, Belgium, Holland and Australia. -- Fawzia Sheikh

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