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Inside this sprawling desert-like compound on the outskirts of Kabul, some 11,000 soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers are training to join the Afghan army - an army that independent and U.S. government analysts are warning is not yet ready to take over the country's fragile security structure.

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According to NATO estimates, more than a quarter of Afghanistan's army will leave this year due to attrition, and almost 3,000 will have been killed or wounded. That means the military will have to boost its recruitment efforts just to maintain its numbers. An overwhelming majority of those who join are functionally illiterate.

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The latest Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction report also finds that the Afghan government is likely to be incapable of sustaining its military facilities. These are harsh judgments for a military that soon will have to function on its own.

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Reading, writing, weapons

The military is working hard to dispel those perceptions and strengthen its capabilities before international combat forces finally leave in 2014. At the Kabul Military Training Center, soldiers are taught to read and write, are trained on NATO weapons, and learn about guerrilla warfare.

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25 Brig. General Aminullah Patyani, head of the Training Center, said right now the country is facing “a war against terrorism, insurgents, and the people they are trying to attack.” He said the training here is preparing his soldiers for an intelligence-led guerrilla war.

30 Patyani added that there is significant coordination between the Ministry of Defense and the Afghan National Directorate of Security. One official told VOA that in addition to military intelligence, some 40 to 50 officers from Afghanistan’s intelligence services are training with the four battalions of soldiers here, totaling more than 5,000.

35 Dotted around the dusty KMTC compound on the outskirts of the city, hidden behind shale-rock mountains, groups of soldiers in green camouflage are grabbing their M16s and lying on the ground shooting at paper targets. Off in the distance, special forces units can be seen training in re-creations of walled areas.

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Meeting challenges

There are also coalition soldiers and commanders here, in what they call a “mentoring” role, as well as private U.S. contractors, like Dyncorp. They say 45 they are needed less and less as Afghan forces become more independent.

But others are concerned. Former Ghazni governor Shir Khosti is not convinced that the Afghan military is ready for the challenges ahead. He said weak vetting procedures have led to insider attacks, and he cited serious truancy problems.

50 Khosti also claimed that so far, the army has not won the confidence of the people.

“Asking the Afghan government of course they are always saying ‘we are ready to take over,’” Khosti said. “But asking any ordinary Afghan are they ready to
55 protect, and the answer is no.”

Preparing for handover

Former military and intelligence officer Jawed Kohistani said the Defense
60 Ministry simply does not have a comprehensive and targeted plan.

“We don’t have any strategy on dealing with the Taliban or against the intelligence service of neighboring countries,” he said. “All training of soldiers and security forces must be based on a specific strategy, which will give them the
65 morale to fight.”

Brig. General Patyani is confident that his troops are up to the task.

“The way our security forces are right now, with the high morale that they have,
70 they will be able to operate and defend from that threat,” he said.

These soldiers training today will have two years to prove their commander right.

