



Vulnerable supply lines put US mission at risk
Six weeks after GlobalPost broke the story of stolen US military computers and hardware, the black market still thrives.
Shahan Mufti
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ISLAMABAD — As President Obama sets in motion a new strategic initiative in Afghanistan and Pakistan, supply lines remain vulnerable to attack and a black market is still thriving in stolen military hardware and computers.

As the U.S. begins a surge of 21,000 troops and military advisers in Afghanistan over the summer, the threat to supply lines and the stolen equipment could compromise the mission, military analysts say.

More than six weeks after GlobalPost broke the news of American military hardware and software being sold openly in markets in Pakistan's northwest, the trade of American goods robbed from supply trucks and smuggled in from Afghanistan is still going on.

U.S. military officials in Pakistan would not comment on GlobalPost's special report titled "In The Wrong Hands," even as attacks on convoys are on the rise.

The problem the U.S. confronts in keeping supply lines open is critical as the U.S. steps up its mission. More troops will need more uniforms, Kevlar vests, boots, canned food, sleeping bags, night vision equipment, and computers — a melange of supplies that enables the military to wage war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the hostile "Af-Pak" terrain.

But just as the demand for war materials is set to surge, the supply of vital equipment to American soldiers remains imperiled in its route through Pakistan and there are few signs of improvement.

Earlier in March another eight trucks laden with NATO supplies were torched outside Peshawar, the largest city in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. Another dozen were damaged when militants armed with automatic weapons and grenades attacked a truck terminal.

Since 2007, several hundred NATO supply trucks have been torched and looted in similar attacks.

Noor Muhammad a trader in Sitara Market, a hub for stolen American military equipment where GlobalPost purchased a U.S. military issue laptop for \$650 last month, says business is still good.

“We feel no threat from law enforcement,” he says. “These are smuggled goods, but we are just meeting people’s demands.”

The day after GlobalPost’s story last month the U.S. Government Accountability Office published a report that revealed that American forces had lost track of more than 87,000 weapons supplied to Afghan security forces between 2004 and 2008.

The report describes a nonchalant American military caught in a murky and corrupt local chain of weapon supply. One reason for such heavy material loss, the report says, is that the “Afghan government logistics policies were not always clear to Afghan army and police property managers.”

But the report also notes “reports of alleged theft and unauthorized resale of weapons are common.”

Here in Pakistan, the country through which nearly three-quarters of all American military equipment travels, things appear to be running along a similar script. A web of state-owned and private, mostly publicly unaccountable, entities handles U.S. military supplies before they ever get into Afghanistan.

A U.S. military official stationed in the region, who spoke to GlobalPost on the condition of anonymity, said the U.S. military was aware of the regular material losses it suffered inside Pakistan. While losing vital material and information was “not a running problem,” the official said, “we are relying on the Pakistani police and security forces” for improved security.

Ahmed Rahsid, the author of the book *Taliban*, says the system through which NATO’s military supplies are transported in Pakistan is “thoroughly corrupt.” “Everyone is getting their cut,” he said, referring to the different levels of the transport chain.

NATO uses private shipping companies like the Denmark-based MAERSK and Singapore-based APL to transport military supplies to Pakistan’s main Arabian Sea port at Karachi.

Here, the National Logistics Corporation, a subsidiary of the Pakistan military, receives all shipping containers, after they have passed through customs. While the corporation does not publicly admit to handling NATO supplies, it confirms that it is responsible for tracking all shipping containers inside the country.

Loosely formalized private trucking companies — the two largest are run by Pashtun families with useful networks in the tribal areas and Afghanistan — load these containers

full of military supplies on the back of elaborately decorated 18-wheelers. These truckers are then responsible for transporting the goods safely to American military bases in Afghanistan.

Shakir Afridi, a trucking baron in Peshawar says the veil of secrecy over the entire process offers an opportunity to many to make illicit money.

“Everyone — the port authorities, custom officials, border checkpoints, the Taliban, even the people receiving the shipments at Bagram — everyone has their own demands.”

A failure to meet the “demands” at any point, he says, not only puts the lives of truck owners and drivers at risk, but also threatens to unravel the supply line.

And when the military equipment that gives American forces the edge in battle does fall off the supply line at one of these hurdles, the real trouble begins.

Jannat Gul, a shopkeeper at the bustling Sitara Market says he would happily sell any military equipment that might come his way ... to anyone.

“We needed no other information on the buyers,” he says, “except money in their pockets.”