

Last updated Thursday, Jul 24, 2008 - 05:39:28 am MST



Sierra Vista, Arizona | Friday, July 25, 2008

Biometrics in the military: New tools, new challenges

By Bill Hess
Herald/Review

Published on Thursday, July 24, 2008

FORT HUACHUCA — Combating the war on terrorism is a combined effort of the nation's intelligence and law enforcement communities, said the Army's top cop.

Identifying individuals who are a threat against the United States, while not stepping on Americans' civil liberties, must be done with care, added the defense secretary's director of defense biometrics.



Brig. Gen. Rodney L. Johnson, provost marshal of the Army and Commander of The U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command, speaks during the 2008 Biometrics and Forensics Summit. (Ed Honda-Herald/Review)

For the commander of the Intelligence Center and Fort Huachuca, Americans are rightfully serious about their civil liberties.

Speaking at the opening session of the two-day Biometrics and Forensics Summit on Fort Huachuca, Brig. Gen. Rodney L. Johnson, provost marshal general of the Army and commander of the Army's Criminal Investigation Command; Tom Dee, director of Defense Biometrics; and Maj. Gen. John Custer, commander of the Intelligence Center and the fort, set the tone for the summit in their opening comments to more than 300 people.

As the first day's keynote speaker, Johnson said, "As a result of the war on terror and the subsequent reorganization of our enemy from conventional forces to an insurgency, a consistent need for forensics data evolved."

Such a change required a more scientific approach to identify the enemy and to neutralize threats to the nation's forces, he said. While at the beginning the forensics capabilities were uneven, they have improved in the past five years, Johnson said.

The improvement has been because of the increasing technology available, which led to the creation of a defense forensics workshop, and through that, the establishment of a steering group.

Through the steering group, it became evident that to fight the global terror war during military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan there was a need to "expand the use of forensics beyond traditional law enforcement and medical applications," Johnson said.

The Forensic Executive Steering Group, which includes the Department of Defense Biometrics Task Force, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Office of the Provost Marshal General "is dedicated to applying forensic science capabilities across the Department of Defense to identify, target, track, detain, eliminate, attribute and relate people, places, things and events to each other," he said.

Commanders are seeing the importance of forensic capabilities "in support of combat operations, and they want more and they want it yesterday," Johnson said.

That has led to the creation of labs in Iraq and Afghanistan. By October, he expects three additional labs will be in Iraq and one in Afghanistan.

"Each lab will access to the full compliment of forensic support: DNA, latent prints, firearms and tool marks and document exploitation," the general said.

Having recently returned from the two combat theaters, Johnson added, "I can tell you that the commanders on the ground recognize the value of these labs and are anxious to get them operational."

The creation of the Forensic Exploitation Battalion, also is a success, he said.

But there is much more work to do to include working within the Defense Department to standardize training in all the services "to form a truly joint team speaking the same language" as well as "developing training and building training support under a standardized form (that) will

improve the unity of effort in availing the benefits of forensics across the battlefield,” the general said.

For Dee, who was introduced as a distinguished speaker at the event, the ability to identify potential enemies is critical “so we can take action.”

But, he hastened to add, “Not everybody is a terrorist.”

The problem is determining who the terrorists are.

“We want to identify people who are a threat against the U.S.,” Dee said.

But, he added, the question is “What is the American public going to allow us to do?”

In an interview last Friday with the Herald/Review, Custer said, “In the United States, we are very, very cognizant of individual rights.”

But if a person travels to Europe, they are constantly being watched by the “fisheye camera at all times,” he said.

European governments are “much more concerned about preventing a terrorist attack and much more apt to follow people than to protect individual rights,” Custer said.

And except for a few places in the United States, that is not done.

“Now when you go to a place like (Las) Vegas you are giving up your rights to gamble,” he said.

Walking into a casino, cameras are checking a person’s face against a data bank of people who the owners don’t want in their facility, and if an individual is identified as one, they are soon approached by “six big guys and escort them out of the casino,” Custer said.

During the Super Bowl after Sept. 11, 2001, 100,000 people who went to the game “passed through video security systems that looked at their faces,” he said. Those mugshots were checked by the Tampa police and the FBI.

But that was shortly after the terrorist attacks on the United States, and “I know law enforcement and judicial agencies decided that the security of the society was more important at that time than the rights of individuals,” the commander of the Intelligence Center said.

Even then, it’s “totally different than that 360-degree fisheye (camera) in Britain that’s always watching you,” he said.

Dee noted that an upcoming issue that must be addressed is exactly what happens when a person’s DNA is captured as part of an identification process.

“Is DNA biometric or forensic?” he asked.

DNA has more information than a fingerprint, and a determination must be made if it can be used to identify potential people who want to harm the United States and how it can be used, Dee said.

That decision must be made before “we are blasted by the public or the Congress,” he added.

Johnson said that for a soldier, sailor, airman or Marine in harm’s way, there are exciting times ahead for those involved in the Department of Defense’s forensic science program.

“By synchronizing our efforts across DOD we can work to realize an enduring holistic forensics capability. This capability will not only serve the needs of the war on terror, but for every conflict or war after that,” he said.

Herald/Review senior reporter Bill Hess can be reached at 515-4615 or by e-mail at bill.hess@svherald.com.

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Comments

to skeptical wrote on Jul 24, 2008 5:37 PM:

" The military is not allowed by law to collect intelligence on U.S. persons unless they are directly threatening military personnel or facilities. "

Skeptical wrote on Jul 24, 2008 9:36 AM:

" General Custer says in reassuring tones QUOTE: "In the United States, we are very, very cognizant of individual rights." END QUOTE. I served a career in the military, and by personal orientation I'm a "law and order guy", and an Independent politically. But I'm dead set against the military ever having anything to do with gathering intelligence on the civilian populace. I remember too well the Army's excesses during the 1960s Vietnam-era student protests. The Army today may have wonderful technology and pristine-like intentions, but it's an organization that, if directed by civilian leadership, will do its bidding without hesitation. "

