

## Program Bolsters Department's Language Capabilities

By Jim Garamone  
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Oct. 5, 2010 – Counterinsurgency operations are based on protecting the population, and to do that, you have to be able to communicate.

During a meeting in Afghanistan's Helmand province, an Army specialist stood between the Helmand governor and Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The young man ensured that both Mullen and the governor understood not only what was being said, but the nuances in the conversation.

The specialist was an expert in Dari, the language of the region. But he also was an expert on the culture. For three hours, he ensured that Mullen and the assembled Afghan leaders communicated.

Because the United States has worldwide commitments, the military, the intelligence community and diplomats need people expert in the languages of the world. But Americans generally don't study foreign languages in much depth. Travel to the Netherlands, and almost everyone speaks English. Many also speak French and German and, of course, Dutch. But if you travel in the United States, you'd better speak English.

The National Security Education program seeks to change this paradigm. The program – aimed at civilians – has awarded more than 4,200 scholarships and fellowships to U.S. citizens to study critical languages and cultures. The services also recruit military personnel to serve these communication needs.

The program gained momentum following the 9/11 attacks, and it is paying off.

Program officials recently honored two participants. Paul Meinshausen, a 2006 program participant, received the Howard Baker Jr. Award. Meinshausen studied Turkish and used the program to receive a master's degree in Eurasian studies. He is a general military analyst at the National Ground Intelligence Center.

Glenda Jakubowski received the Sol Linowitz Award. Jakubowski holds a master's degree in international and security studies and serves in Iraq as senior analyst at the Joint Intelligence Operations Center. She speaks Arabic, and studied in Cairo.

The program was founded by former Oklahoma Sen. David Boren in 1991. Boren recognized that national security organizations needed these capabilities, and proposed the legislation founding the program. He now is president of the University of Oklahoma.

U.S. Central Command has particularly been pushing the program, said Nancy Weaver of the Defense Language Office.

"Language and culture are essential to the fight," she said during a recent interview. All servicemembers deploying to the Centcom area of operations should receive at least an introduction to language and culture in their training, she said, noting that language is key to understanding a culture.

“There are clues to a culture that are hidden in the language,” she explained. “That learning process is continual. It doesn’t stop when you leave the classroom. You’ve got to interact with the local population in order to better understand what their concerns are and to get the information you need to keep your people safe.”

The need for language skills in a counterinsurgency fight is understood, but other military operations also require the capability, Weaver said. “After the earthquake in Haiti, we needed personnel who could speak Creole,” she noted. “We were able to get many native and heritage speakers there quickly.”

Native speakers are those Americans who were born in a country and learned the language growing up. Heritage speakers are first-generation Americans who learned the language from their families.

More than 7,000 different languages spoken in the world, and defense personnel can be needed anywhere. Still, the department has to focus on a few so-called strategic languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Urdu and Dari.

“If you want to negotiate, if you want to interact, if you want to better understand the people you deal with, then you’ve got to make the effort to learn their language,” Weaver said.

Defense Department officials also look at what languages are likely to be needed in the future.

“Given the emerging countries in Africa, learning those languages will be important in the coming years,” Weaver said. “If we can start building the capability now, we can have those [capabilities] when the need arises.”

The program is not large by DOD standards at \$37 million, said Robert Slater, executive director of the National Security Education Program. He emphasized that the program teaches language “as a communicative skill, rather than for a literature major.” A generation ago, he said, the emphasis was on reading, not in conversation.

Slater said the higher-education community made a mistake in dropping the foreign-language requirement, and noted that many universities are reinstating it.

Program officials are working not only with colleges, but also with high schools and elementary schools to prepare the next generation of language students, he said.

“This is not a short-term program,” Weaver said. “It will be needed. You could get along with one language 25 years ago. But with technology the way it is, globalization is here. Americans realize that as a nation we need to work on language capability.”