Leaks of Military Files Resume

Despite security efforts, flash drives stolen from U.S. base in Afghanistan are still sold at bazaar.

By Paul Watson, Times Staff Writer
April 25, 2006

BAGRAM, Afghanistan — Just ays after U.S. troops were ordered to plug a security breach at their base here, the black market trade in computer memory drives containing military documents was thriving again Monday.

Documents on flash drives for sale at a bazaar across from the American military base over the weekend contained U.S. officers’ names and cellphone numbers and instructions on using pain to control prisoners who put up resistance. A study guide on one of the drives describes tactics for interrogating and controlling detainees by pinching or striking nerve and pressure points on their face, neck, arms and legs.

Traders at the bazaar near Bagram’s main gate were openly displaying pilfered U.S. military memory drives in their shops Monday, two weeks after the Los Angeles Times reported on the black market in computer equipment, some of which contained American military documents marked “Secret.”

U.S. soldiers spent thousands of dollars later that week buying scores of flash memory drives from the bazaar. The soldiers walked through the black market with a box of money, purchasing all the computer equipment they could find.

For several days afterward, no more memory drives were available.

But an 18-year-old Afghan man who works on the base said that by Friday, memory drives were being smuggled off the base again. The devices are smaller than disposable lighters.

Several shopkeepers have said in recent days that they are eager for the military to return to the market so they can sell their new stock for premium prices.

Some of the memory drives for sale earlier this month listed the names, addresses and photographs of Afghan spies providing information to U.S. Special Forces. Others that were also marked “Secret” included American military officials’ view that the Taliban and their allies were using bases in Pakistan to launch attacks in Afghanistan. One had maps dated Dec. 1, 2001, the day after U.S. and Afghan militia forces began their offensive at Tora Bora, that described possible escape routes of Osama bin Laden. The routes in the maps start not at Tora Bora, where many had thought Bin Laden was at the time, but in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar.

Some of the drives contained sensitive documents that had been deleted but could be retrieved with software available on the Internet.

Files on some of the drives for sale at the bazaar Sunday had been deleted too. It was not known if any of those drives contained classified information.

Lt. Mike Cody, a spokesman for the U.S. military here, did not respond Monday to a request for comment on the renewed sales of flash drives.

At the Pentagon, Air Force Lt. Col. Todd Vician said Monday that U.S. forces in
Afghanistan were continuing to investigate the theft of the equipment and how to prevent further security breaches at Bagram.

"It is important for the investigation to continue, to determine what the problem is," Vician said. "The command in Afghanistan is taking this very seriously. We are treating this as seriously as any release of classified, sensitive information."

On April 13, the Army launched a criminal investigation and Lt. Gen. Karl W. Eikenberry, overall commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, ordered a review of policies and procedures concerning the way computer hardware and software are accounted for.

At the bazaar, the Bagram worker said guards carefully searched people leaving the base until Wednesday, less than a week after U.S. soldiers bought up the military computer equipment from the marketplace.

The teen, who described his job as collecting U.S. soldiers' laundry, said he had smuggled out four flash memory drives to a local shopkeeper after shift change Sunday afternoon.

"They were checking us with metal detectors and they were checking every part of our body," he said.

"Still the checking is a little serious, but not as much as it was for the last four or five days. I tried to bring a box of playing cards out but it was really difficult and they said it was not allowed."

Several more U.S. military drives were on sale at other shops in the bazaar Monday. One shopkeeper said he had been selling pilfered American military flash drives for four years, mostly to young Afghan computer users looking for cheap equipment, but also to some foreigners.

"I may have sold thousands of these flashes since I have come and opened this shop," the shopkeeper said. He asked not to be named because he feared retribution.