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# Afghan Corruption a Growing Concern

Posted by Zia - 2008/04/02 15:30

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Afghanistan will top the agenda when NATO member nations gather this week in Bucharest to discuss the state of the alliance. General Dan McNeil, commander of the alliance's 43,250 troops in Afghanistan, has lobbied for reinforcements to help battle the rising insurgency in the country's south. But commanders on the ground would also like a little more help from the Afghans on whose behalf they're fighting. "Frankly, defeating the Taliban is the least of our worries," says one. "They are not going to beat us. It's not them that are crippling the economy. What is killing this country is corruption and drugs. That is not for NATO to deal with; that is for the Afghan government to deal with." Military measures are temporary, at best: If Afghans don't trust their government, NATO's best efforts will ultimately be futile.

<http://www.asiaobserver.com/images/fbfiles/images/corrupt.jpg>

Transparency International ranked Afghanistan 172nd out of the 179 countries surveyed last year on its corruption-perceptions Index. Hardly surprising, then, that despite thousands more troops on the ground and billions of dollars in aid, the Taliban insurgency has only grown stronger. Ordinary Afghan people are fed up with a government that has squandered their faith and hope by pillaging whatever small treasures remain after 27 years at war. Yet they also resent the international forces that put that government in power but look away when it doesn't fulfill its duties. And the distance between the people and the government in Afghanistan is ever widening, creating fertile ground for the insurgency to take root even amongst those who welcomed the new government when it first came to power.

"Corruption is the tree. Terrorism, destabilization, smuggling and poppy are its branches," says parliamentarian Hossein Balkhi. "If you cut down corruption, the rest will die."

Every Afghan has a story about corruption. The electronics store owner in my old neighborhood in the capital, Kabul, hasn't had electricity for the past year, because he refuses to pay the \$400 bribe required to secure a connection to the electrical grid. The scarcity of so many basic necessities allows petty corruption to flourish in many corners of the world without necessarily feeding an insurgency. But Afghanistan's corruption is intimately linked to a culture of violence. The driver of an Afghan friend was picked up one day by the police, beaten, stripped naked and left outside in the snow for several nights until his employer paid a bribe of \$3,000 to release him. The principled stance would have been to complain, but to whom? And for how many days? And what if it only made things worse? "We could have complained afterwards," says the employer. "But then we could have been charged ourselves for bribery." The electronics shop owner, Adel Shah, 22, puts it succinctly: "Even robbery victims won't go to the courts because you have to pay a bribe. You would have to quit your job in order to complain to the police, because it takes so much time."

And also money. According to Afghans, judges routinely accept bribes for favorable verdicts. Mohammad Mumtaz, an Afghan businessman visiting from the U.S., tells the story of a cousin's property dispute gone bad. His opponent paid a higher bribe to the court, and his cousin landed in jail for trying to get a squatter off his land. But it turned out OK, says Mumtaz. The cousin went through a broker who was a friend of the judge, paid \$6500, and was released a month early. Such stories take on a more somber note when criminals and alleged members of the Taliban are involved — such as Timur Shah, sentenced to death for kidnap, rape and murder, who "escaped" on the eve of his execution last October, while the other 16 men on death row met their intended fate.

"What do you expect," asks Izzatullah Wasifi, Director of the General Independent Administration of Anti-Corruption and Bribery, "when we pay a \$60 a month, give him a gun, and tell him to stand up against terrorists and narcotics smugglers, when everyone around him is corrupt? We pay him nothing and expect him to act like an angel and go home and feed his family what — dust, rocks?" The solution, he says, is better training and higher salaries, both of which are forthcoming under a new U.S.-led national police-training program. But as long as higher government officials act with impunity, corruption will not be seen as a crime. "You have to start from the top," says Wasifi. "If I don't take it, then my department won't take it. If I take it, how can I expect people below me not to?"

Last fall, President Hamid Karzai admitted that several senior officials were involved in corruption. Though he didn't reveal any names, he swore to take action. Five months later, not a single official has been successfully prosecuted. Meanwhile, politicians and ministers build mansions and collect armored SUVs worth far more than their yearly salaries. "If we can't punish them, how do we tell a small government official who makes \$40 a month not to take bribes?" asks Wasifi.

Wasifi understands the value of punishment. Twenty years ago he served time in an American jail for dealing drugs. "I paid for it. I learned. This is why I believe in good law. It works."

The Taliban, for all its draconian practices and human rights abuses, is also remembered for bringing order following the excesses of rival commanders in the country's civil war. Crime was punished — brutally and in excess, yes, but visibly and uniformly. If the Taliban and the insurgents can convincingly offer civilians a return to law and order, they will gain support. The Afghan government may realize that it's better to take a page from their book — tempered with human rights and due process — than to be defeated by an inability to crush corruption.

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## Putting the Hell in Helmand

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In the war-torn south, the British and the Taliban are both resented

AKHTAR, a well-to-do cloth merchant in his 50s, recalls the optimism Afghans in his province of Helmand felt when the Taliban were defeated in 2001. It is exhausted. "Now we just say everyone should leave us alone." And that includes British NATO forces. Mr Akhtar speaks for many. In ten days in Helmand this correspondent found no one who would say that British forces had improved things.

As NATO held a summit in Bucharest this week, Mr Akhtar's anger was a salutary reminder of how much it has to do to salvage a respectable outcome from the war. He is just the sort of Afghan who should welcome NATO's efforts to eliminate the Taliban. Yet, like everyone else, he blames the insecurity in Helmand for making life a misery, and his wealth futile.

NATO wants to demonstrate first of all that no ally is withdrawing; on the contrary, France has confirmed it will send another battalion (at least 800 troops). Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, says the mission is succeeding, and urges patience. NATO also stresses a "comprehensive approach", in which military action is backed up by political and economic progress, eventually allowing Afghan forces to be at the forefront of the fight.

But, in truth, all sides in the struggle in Helmand—the Afghan government, the British forces supporting it and the Taliban—are steadily losing popularity. In the bazaar of Lashkargar, the Helmand capital, the mood is "a pox on all their houses". "The sooner the British leave, the better," says one man, to growls of agreement.

Helmandis have endured instability for three decades. But the arrival of British forces and a surge in fighting two years ago have made things worse. Locals were used to negotiating a passage from a known commander, whether government or Taliban. Now they face a bewildering array of local bandits, corrupt police, tribal militias, Taliban and NATO forces. All can prove deadly. It is a grinding, bloody stalemate, with inevitable "collateral damage".

Mr Akhtar says he was robbed and beaten by the police when he last attempted the dangerous journey to Kandahar, on business. The new police chief in Helmand, Mohammad Hussein Andiwai, acknowledges the problems in his force. He has arrested 37 of his own officers.

The British government has sought to win local "hearts and minds" with reconstruction aid for roads, wells and the like. But most Helmandis impugn British motives. Xenophobic at the best of times, they spread their accusations widely: the British are intent on avenging 19th-century defeats in Afghanistan; are scheming with Pakistan; they are planning to steal drug profits. Attempts to co-opt elements of the Taliban, which led the Afghan government to expel two Western diplomats last December, reinforced suspicions.

It is some consolation that the Taliban are also ever more unpopular. And Western intelligence officials claim the militants' co-ordination is breaking down under the relentless killing of Taliban leaders (200 have been killed and 100 arrested in the past year) by Western special forces. Taliban commanders in Helmand bear out this claim. Chains of command have become disjointed, they admit, with larger numbers of junior commanders filling the space left by senior figures such as Mullah Dadullah, their overall commander in Helmand, who was killed by British special forces last May. Internal discipline is harder to enforce. New recruits tend to be younger, more radical and from outside.

Two out of five Taliban fighters in Helmand are now outsiders, according to one Taliban leader. This causes friction with local people. One older Taliban commander admitted that some of his colleagues have been treating people "too harshly". Local people have become more vocal in demanding that reconstruction be allowed and schools reopened. Militants differ over how to respond.

The Taliban's strongest suit has been law and order, thanks to their brutal readiness to string up criminals or chop off their hands and feet. Local people say Taliban-held areas still have the best security in the province. But the Taliban are losing their incorruptible image. One local Talib grumbles that criminals use the Taliban as cover. Another claims they have been forced to weed out corrupt fighters. Suicide-bombings have also cost local support. Western diplomats claim 90% of attempted bombings are now being foiled, mainly thanks to tip-offs from local people. But they must also worry about how much intelligence flows the other way.

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## The Opium Brides of Afghanistan

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In the country's poppy-growing provinces, farmers are being forced to sell their daughters to pay loans.

Khalida's father says she's 9—or maybe 10. As much as Sayed Shah loves his 10 children, the functionally illiterate Afghan farmer can't keep track of all their birth dates. Khalida huddles at his side, trying to hide beneath her chador and headscarf. They both know the family can't keep her much longer. Khalida's father has spent much of his life raising opium, as men like him have been doing for decades in the stony hillsides of eastern Afghanistan and on the dusty southern plains. It's the only reliable cash crop most of those farmers ever had. Even so, Shah and his family barely got by: traffickers may prosper, but poor farmers like him only subsist. Now he's losing far more than money. "I never imagined I'd have to pay for growing opium by giving up my daughter," says Shah.

The family's heartbreak began when Shah borrowed \$2,000 from a local trafficker, promising to repay the loan with 24 kilos of opium at harvest time. Late last spring, just before harvest, a government crop-eradication team appeared at the family's little plot of land in Laghman province and destroyed Shah's entire two and a half acres of poppies. Unable to meet his debt, Shah fled with his family to Jalalabad, the capital of neighboring Nangarhar province. The trafficker found them anyway and demanded his opium. So Shah took his case before a tribal council in Laghman and begged for leniency. Instead, the elders unanimously ruled that Shah would have to reimburse the trafficker by giving Khalida to him in marriage. Now the family can only wait for the 45-year-old drugrunner to come back for his prize. Khalida wanted to be a teacher someday, but that has become impossible. "It's my fate," the child says.

Afghans disparagingly call them "loan brides"—daughters given in marriage by fathers who have no other way out of debt. The practice began with the dowry a bridegroom's family traditionally pays to the bride's father in tribal Pashtun society. These days the amount ranges from \$3,000 or so in poorer places like Laghman and Nangarhar to \$8,000 or more in Helmand, Afghanistan's No. 1 opium-growing province. For a desperate farmer, that bride price can be salvation—but at a cruel cost. Among the Pashtun, debt marriage puts a lasting stain on the honor of the bride and her family. It brings shame on the country, too. President Hamid Karzai recently told the nation: "I call on the people give their daughters for money; they shouldn't give them to old men, and they shouldn't give them in forced marriages."

All the same, local farmers say a man can get killed for failing to repay a loan. No one knows how many debt weddings take place in Afghanistan, where 93 percent of the world's heroin and other opiates originate. But Afghans say the number of loan brides keeps rising as poppy-eradication efforts push more farmers into default. "This will be our darkest year since 2000," says Baz Mohammad, 65, a white-bearded former opium farmer in Nangarhar. "Even more daughters will be sold this year." The old man lives with the anguish of selling his own 13-year-old daughter in 2000, after Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar banned poppy growing. "Lenders never show any mercy," the old man says. Local farmers say more than one debtor has been bound hand and foot, then locked into a small windowless room with a smoldering fire, slowly choking to death.

While law enforcers predict yet another record opium harvest in Afghanistan this spring, most farmers are struggling to survive. An estimated 500,000 Afghan families support themselves by raising poppies, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. Last year those growers received an estimated \$1 billion for their crops—about \$2,000 per household. With at least six members in the average family, opium growers' per capita income is roughly \$300. The real profits go to the traffickers, their Taliban allies and the crooked officials who help them operate. The country's well-oiled narcotics machine generates in excess of \$4 billion a year from exports of processed opium and heroin—more than half of Afghanistan's \$7.5 billion GDP, according to the UNODC.

Efforts to promote other crops have failed. Wheat or corn brings \$250 an acre at best, while poppy growers can expect 10 times that much. Besides, poppies are more dependable: hardier than either wheat or corn and more tolerant of drought and extreme heat and cold. And in a country with practically no government-funded credit for small farmers, opium growers can easily get advances on their crops. The borrower merely agrees to repay the cash with so many kilos of opium, at a price stipulated by the lender—often 40 percent or more below market value. Islam forbids charging interest on a loan, but moneylenders in poppy country elude the ban by packaging the deal as a crop-futures transaction—and never mind that the rate of return is tantamount to usury.

Opium is thriving in the south, particularly the provinces of Helmand and Nimruz, where Taliban fighters keep government eradication teams at bay. But times are perilously hard for farmers in other places like Nangarhar, a longtime poppy-growing province on the mountainous Pakistani border. Mohammad Zahir Khan, a Nangarhar sharecropper in his late 40s, borrowed \$850 against last spring's harvest, promising 10 kilos of opium to the lender—about \$1,250 on the local market. The cash bought food and other necessities for his family and allowed him to get seed, fertilizer and help tending his three sharecropped acres. In the spring he collected 45 kilos of raw opium paste, half of which went immediately to the landowner.

But before Khan could repay the loan, his wife fell seriously ill with a kidney ailment. She needed better medical care than Nangarhar could offer, so he rushed her across the Pakistani border to a private hospital in Peshawar. It cost almost every cent they had, and Khan knew his opium debt would only grow. Worse, the provincial governor, a former warlord named Gul Agha Sherzai, chose that moment to declare his own war on drugs, jailing hundreds of local farmers who

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were caught planting opium. Nangarhar had 45,000 acres in poppies a year ago; today drug experts say the province is totally clean.

Late last year Khan reluctantly gave his 16-year-old daughter, Gul Ghoti, in marriage to the lender's 15-year-old son. Besides forgiving Khan's debt, the creditor gave him a \$1,500 cash dowry. Khan calls him an honorable man. "Until the end of my life I will feel shame because of what I did to my daughter," Khan says. "I still can't look her in the eye." But at least she was old enough to marry, he adds. He claims one local farmer recently had to promise the hand of his 2-month-old daughter to free his family from an opium debt. Khan is raising wheat this year. He doubts it will support his family, and he worries that eventually one of his two younger daughters will become a loan bride. Neither of them is yet in her teens.

Eradication efforts aren't the only thing pushing opium marriages. Poppy acreage is expanding in Helmand province, but loan brides are common there, too, says Bashir Ahmad Nadim, a local journalist. He says moneylenders in Helmand are always looking for "opium flowers"— marriageable daughters ready for plucking if crop failure or family emergency forces a borrower into default. In the south's drug-fueled economy, fathers of opium brides often get hefty cash bonuses on top of having their debts forgiven.

But in Nangarhar, even former lenders are feeling the pinch. Enaghul, 40, used to be a relatively prosperous poppy farmer. Today he has little to show for his past wealth aside from his 17-year-old daughter-in-law, Shaukina, and a 2-month-old grandson. "She is pretty and works hard in the fields," Enaghul says, still happy to have won her for his son. Four years ago he gave Shaukina's father a loan in return for a promise of 30 kilos of opium, never imagining that both their fields would be eradicated before harvest. That's how Enaghul's son married Shaukina. But with the opium ban, Enaghul says his family is barely surviving. They make less than \$2 a day growing tomatoes and potatoes. Enaghul casts an appraising eye on his youngest daughter, Sharifa, 5, as she runs after a goat in the courtyard of their mud-and-brick home. "I think she would fetch between \$500 and \$600," he says. With luck, he says, he might be able to postpone the wedding five or six years.

Some Western officials promise the hard times won't last much longer. Loren Stoddard, Afghanistan director for the U.S. Agency for International Development, says crop-substitution programs are already yielding results. As many as 40,000 farming families in Nangarhar are receiving some kind of compensation for the loss of opium revenues, he says, and USAID has financed the planting of 1.3 million fruit, nut and other trees in the province since 2006, with plans for an additional 300,000 this year. There's even a new mill producing 30 tons of chicken feed a day. "Good things are happening here," Stoddard says. "I think Nangarhar will take off in the next two years."

Many farmers doubt they can hold out that long. Kachkol Khan looks around his single acre of wheat in Pa Khel village and asks how he will feed his family of seven. "What we earn from this wheat won't feed us for one month," he says. Six months ago he gave the hand of his 13-year-old daughter, Bibi Gula, to settle an opium debt of \$700, with roughly \$1,500 cash thrown in. That's what they're living on now. At least his creditor agreed to let Gula stay home until she turns 15. "I'm not happy with what I did," Khan says. "Every daughter has ambitions to marry with dignity. I fear she'll be treated as a second-class wife and as a maid." Even worse is his worry that the same future may await his two younger daughters, 11 and 10.

Angiza Afridi, 28, has spent much of the past year interviewing more than 100 families about opium weddings in two of Nangarhar's 22 districts. The schoolteacher and local TV reporter already had firsthand knowledge of the tragedy. Five years ago one of her younger aunts, then 16, was forced to marry a 55-year-old man to pay off an older uncle's opium debt, and three years ago an 8-year-old cousin was also given in marriage to make good on a drug loan. "This practice of marrying daughters to cover debts is becoming a bad habit," says Afridi.

Even so, the results of her survey shocked her. In the two districts she studied, approximately half the new brides had been given in marriage to repay opium debts. The new brides included children as young as 5 years old; until they're old enough to consummate their marriages, they mostly work as household servants for their in-laws. "These poor girls have no future," she says. The worst of it may be the suicides. Afridi learned of one 15-year-old opium bride who poisoned herself on her wedding day late last year and an 11-year-old who took a fatal dose of opium around the same time. Her new in-laws were refusing to let her visit her parents.

Gul Ghoti is on her first visit home since her wedding six months ago. She says it's a relief to be back with her father and mother in their two-room mud-and-brick house, if only temporarily. "My heart is still with my parents, brothers and sisters," she says. "Only my body is with my husband's family." She says she personally knows of two opium brides who killed themselves. "One of the girls had been badly beaten by her husband's brother, the other by her husband," she says. Ghoti says she's considered suicide, too, but Islam stopped her. "I pray that God doesn't give me a daughter if she ends up like me."

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