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Afghan Finance Minister under Scrutiny

By Alissa J. Rubin

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Afghanistan's powerful finance minister came under scrutiny on Wednesday when an Afghan television network broadcast copies of two of his bank account statements that showed sizable payments from businesses and individuals and transfers of money from those accounts to bank accounts in Canada.

It is unclear for now whether the deposits and transfers were legitimate transactions, as Finance Minister Omar Zakhilwal insists, or a red flag signaling malfeasance in one of the most critical ministries in terms of driving the country's future. The Finance Ministry oversees the Afghan budget, the collection of taxes, customs duties and the allocation of money to other ministries.

The report on Tolo Television, which included an interview with Mr. Zakhilwal, showed copies of his bank statements from Standard Chartered Bank and Alfalah Bank from the years 2007-11 and stated that more than \$1 million had been deposited into his accounts in that time and that some of the money had been transferred out of the country. The highlighted transactions included a \$200,000 deposit from Safi Landmark, an Afghan company that runs hotels and other businesses here.

Mr. Zakhilwal said that the money in the accounts had been earned through his work as a consultant. "Before I came to Afghanistan, I was a doctor of economics and had a job in Canada. I was a university professor there," he said in the Tolo interview.

"I had consultancy responsibilities," he added, noting that he had worked for the World Bank and written chapters for books. Advisers in Afghanistan are paid \$1,500 a day, he said.

A Finance Ministry spokesman, Najibullah Manali, dismissed the report as “character assassination,” adding: “If anyone wants to accrue money illegally, he does not do it through banks and bank accounts. There is a very safe hawala system of money transfer in which the money earned through corruption can be transferred with so much safety that no one can catch you.”

“No one resorts to corruption through the proper banking system, which can be tracked and detected,” he said.

The denials did not convince the chief of the high office on oversight, Azizullah Ludin, who has looked at the banking documents reviewed by the television network. He said he would send a team of investigators to the Finance Ministry on Saturday, the first day of the workweek.

“All the bank statements and documents show the transactions took place,” he said. “All those documents seem authentic.”

Mr. Zakhilwal, a fluent English speaker, has long been a favorite of the international community and a public proponent of transparency. His reputation among Afghans is less shining: he was known as a chief fund-raiser for President Hamid Karzai during his 2009 re-election campaign, corralling millions of dollars in donations that were never reported to the election commission, according to news reports.

An official in the attorney general’s office said that there were no criminal investigations of the ministry or of Mr. Zakhilwal.

The disclosure of his bank records comes at a delicate moment for Mr. Karzai’s government, which is trying to show that it is clamping down on corruption. That is in part to satisfy Western donors who want to see real progress in ensuring that the dollars they give are actually spent on projects and programs.