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## Afghans frustrated by corruption at every level of government

By Golab Shah Bawar

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The mayor of Mazar-e Sharif was outlining how the Afghan authorities were tackling corruption, when an elderly man stopped him in his tracks.

"If you want to fight corruption, the greatest corruption exists in your own administration," said Nek Baba. "You should reform yourself first." The blunt remark came at a "corruption awareness workshop," hosted by the municipal government for an invited audience of 300 local elders and dignitaries.

Nek Baba's particular grievance was that land plots were being handed out free of charge to the rich and powerful, instead of to people who needed them.

In response, Mayor Yunos Moqim acknowledged that Nek Baba was largely right. He accepted that corrupt practices take place in the city government, but promised that he was serious about rooting them out.

The exchange neatly illustrates the situation in Afghanistan today. Everyone agrees corruption is rampant at every level of government. Everyone says something needs to be done about it. But little tangible progress has been made in making the bureaucracy more honest over the last decade. Few are arrested; few are held accountable.

Frustrated residents of northern Afghanistan say they cannot get anything done without paying off some official.

"People have to pay bribes just to get what's legally due to them. If they won't pay up, they get harassed under a range of pretexts, their affairs don't get processed and obstacles are placed in their way," Mazar-e Sharif resident Gholam Sakhi said.

As community leader of Qarghan Kocha, a neighborhood in the city, Gholam Sakhi is often asked to accompany local residents to local government offices to help sort out their affairs.

He explained how the system worked. "Every office has middlemen. When somebody goes to the office to get some paperwork processed, the staff hassle him so much that he's forced to turn to the middlemen, who then does the processing in exchange for a cash payment.

"Corruption in government offices undermines our confidence in them," he said. While Afghans feel frustrated by the bribery and corrupt practices that affects their daily lives, many feel powerless to fight back, saying there is little chance of change at the day-to-day level unless reforms start at the top.

"If high-ranking officials weren't involved in corruption, lower-level employees would never be corrupt," said a trader who rents a shop at the Balkh Bazaar in Mazar-e Sharif.

"Look, this document shows how we've been charged for six square meters of floor space, while they've only given us three square meters," he said. "These ground-floor shops are owned by a senior official in the (provincial) governor's office. How are we going to file a complaint against him? He has the prosecution, judiciary and police in his pockets. If we said anything, he's got his own armed men who could kill us."

According to Wakil Matin, a social affairs expert in Balkh province, "the fundamental roots of administrative corruption lie in the capital, and it has spread into the provinces from there. If the president gets serious about it and launches a proper effort in the capital, it will take two days to eliminate administrative corruption in the provinces."

President Hamid Karzai has said many times in the past that he is serious about dealing with corruption, but there are few indications that he is actively pursuing a policy to root it out.

Meanwhile, the head of the High Office for Oversight and Anti-Corruption, Azizullah Ludin, recently accused two cabinet ministers of corruption. Yet both retain their high posts in the Karzai government.

In Balkh province, counter-corruption chief Shamsullah Jawid says low pay for public servants, a general atmosphere of lawlessness, poor levels of education and a sense of despondency about Afghanistan's future all allow corruption to flourish.

"Not only in Balkh, in the entire northern zone, administrative corruption has proliferated to a level where people have completely lost faith in government," he said. "At the anti-graft meeting

in Mazar-e Sharif, Nek Baba had little faith that the authorities had any intention of changing things.

"This gathering is an attempt to deceive people," he said. "For God's sake, do not pour salt on our wounds any more."