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Associated Press

While US talks withdrawal, Afghan corruption soars

By BRADLEY KLAPPER
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The farmer picking apples in the outskirts of Kabul must pay the Taliban $33 to ship out each truckload of fruit. The governor sends in armed men to chase workers off job sites if the official bribes aren't paid. Poor neighborhoods never get their U.N.-provided wheat, long since sold on the black market.

These are some of the elements, large and small, that together form the elaborate organized crime environment Afghans contend with daily. And despite the hoped-for success of the U.S. military surge and President Barack Obama's claims of significant progress, Afghanistan's resemblance to a mafia state that cannot serve its citizens may only be getting worse, according to an upcoming report by the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based think tank.

The 46-page study, to be released next week, looks specifically at Afghanistan's heartland: the rural areas of Ghazni, Wardak, Logar and other provinces just beyond the periphery of Kabul. Unemployment is high, government presence is low and the insurgency operates with impunity. Corruption and cooperation with the Taliban reach the highest levels of local governance.

"Nearly a decade after the U.S.-led military intervention little has been done to challenge the perverse incentives of continued conflict in Afghanistan," the research group says. Rather, violence and the billions of dollars in international aid have brought wealthy officials and insurgents together. And "the economy as a result is increasingly dominated by a criminal oligarchy of politically connected businessmen," the report concludes.

The sobering analysis of a culture of corruption that long predates the U.S.-military effort comes as Obama tries to highlight military and other gains in Afghanistan as proof that Americans can leave. The widespread abuse of power from simple shakedowns to outright collusion with the Taliban will surely outlive the presence of American combat troops.

In announcing that he would pull out 10,000 soldiers this year and 23,000 more by the end of next summer, Obama made it clear that his timetable for a U.S. military drawdown was not going to be beholden to further security advances or the ability of American and Afghan forces to maintain their recent gains. Obama didn't mention the issue of corruption.

But regardless of how many troops are withdrawn, and how fast they come home, Obama acknowledged the U.S. withdrawal by 2015 will create challenges for the country. "We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place," the president said. A responsible end to the war is achievable, but he warned of "dark days ahead."

For ordinary Afghans, the situation in the center of the country provides a valuable case study. There, the Pashtun majority lives alongside Hazaras and Tajiks. Foreign money has created competition even among the insurgent groups as fighters loyal to Mullah Omar's Taliban vie with the Haqqani network and local militants for a share of the riches. Citizens end up squeezed by them and government officials, the report argues.

In the district of Qarabagh, southwest of Kabul, insurgents share an informal alliance with the local commander, Gen. Bashi Habibubullah. In nearby Ghazni city and elsewhere, rich chromite mines were plundered for export for the benefit of the provincial governor, Usmani Usmani.

Usmani was eventually removed from his post but only after becoming a "particularly embarrassing example of corruption," according to Candace Rondeaux, International Crisis Group's senior analyst for Afghanistan. To move the chromite — a mineral that goes primarily to Pakistan and then to China for stainless steel production — Usmani contracted the help of insurgents. They would then coordinate attacks to distract security forces away from outgoing trucks, Rondeaux said.

The pervasiveness of the corruption hasn't escaped the attention of American officials, either. In a 2009 diplomatic memo released by the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks, former Ambassador Francis Ricciardone noted how "conversations paint a picture of criminal enterprise masquerading as public administration in Ghazni."

At the most micro of levels, there are the apples. The taxes may pale in comparison to the weapons and drug trades, but with insurgents gaining a large chunk of the revenues from hundreds of thousands of exports each year, the profits help feed the conflict. And for farmers living close to subsistence levels, the extortion may make survival even a challenge.

Ultimately, the enduring corruption and collusion between political elites and insurgents may not define the post-war Afghanistan or what America's nearly 15-year legacy will mean when all U.S. troops have departed. But it does challenge any notion of a clean exit.

While the focus in Washington has centered on bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, Rondeaux said her research of everyday life in Afghanistan shows it would be a mistake to see a political solution as a solve-all to the country's problems.

"It will not address the growing organized crime networks in Afghanistan," she said. "The U.S. and its partners can withdraw their forces and make power-sharing arrangements. It doesn't mean these will hold, or that Americans should feel comfortable with how they are leaving this place."