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Karzai officials seen hindering bribery probes

By Greg Miller and Ernesto Londoño

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Top officials in President Hamid Karzai's government have repeatedly derailed corruption investigations of politically connected Afghans, according to U.S. officials who have provided Afghanistan's authorities with wiretapping technology and other assistance in efforts to crack down on endemic graft.

In recent months, the U.S. officials said, Afghan prosecutors and investigators have been ordered to cross names off case files, prevent senior officials from being placed under arrest and disregard evidence against executives of a major financial firm suspected of helping the nation's elite move millions of dollars overseas.



Sherpur palaces, symbol of afghan corruption

As a result, U.S. advisers sent to Kabul by the Justice Department, the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Administration have come to see Afghanistan's corruption problem in increasingly stark terms.

"Above a certain level, people are being very well protected," said a senior U.S. official involved in the investigations.

Karzai spokesman Waheed Omar denied investigations had been derailed. "There is no case, no instance, in which the palace or anyone from the palace has interfered with a case," he said.

Afghanistan is awash in international aid and regarded as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Indeed, even as the United States and its allies pour money in, U.S. officials estimate that as much as \$1 billion a year is flowing out as part of a massive cash exodus. The money, as first reported in The Washington Post in February, is often carried out in full view of customs officials at Kabul's airport, where such transfers are legal as long as they are declared. Officials suspect much of the cash is going to the Persian Gulf emirate of Dubai, where elite Afghans, including Karzai's older brother, have villas.

For the Obama administration, the ability of Afghan investigators to crack down on corruption is crucial. If American voters see Karzai's government as hopelessly corrupt, public support for the war could plunge. Corruption also fuels the Taliban insurgency and complicates efforts to persuade ordinary Afghans to side with leaders in Kabul.

Afghanistan's attorney general, Mohammed Ishaq Aloko, was seen as a potential ally against corruption when he took the job two years ago. Some investigations have ended in convictions. But U.S. officials said that Aloko, a native of Kandahar province who studied law in Germany, has repeatedly impeded prosecutions of suspects with political ties.

In meetings with U.S. Justice Department officials, Aloko has seemed almost apologetic and acknowledged coming under pressure from Karzai as well as members of parliament, officials said. On one occasion, according to a U.S. official, Aloko told his American counterparts, "I'm doing this because that is what the president tells me I have to do."

The official, like others quoted in this report, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive investigations.

Aloko referred questions to his deputy, Rahmatullah Nazari, who blamed resource constraints for his office's failure to win more corruption convictions. "There isn't any kind of pressure on the attorney general's office," Nazari said. "If anyone caves to pressure, they should go to prison."

But U.S. officials point to multiple instances of interference. The most prominent example to surface publicly involves Afghanistan's former minister of Islamic affairs, who fled the country this year as prosecutors were preparing to charge him with extorting millions of dollars from companies seeking contracts to take pilgrims to the Muslim holy land, a trip known as the hajj.

A travel ban was issued to block the former minister, Mohammad Siddiq Chakari, from leaving. But U.S. officials said Chakari escaped after showing airport security officials a letter he obtained from Aloko's office saying he had cooperated in the case and was not to be detained. Nazari said Chakari had not been convicted of a crime and, therefore, could not be prevented from leaving.

Chakari, who is now in London, has repeatedly maintained his innocence. Because there is no extradition treaty between Afghanistan and Britain, U.S. officials said it is unlikely that he will ever stand trial. Even so, some regard his departure as a moral victory.

"The very fact that the former minister of the hajj had to leave the country is in a way a remarkable achievement," said Steve Kraft, director of Afghanistan and Pakistan programs for the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement. "We would rather see him in jail here. But in the old days, they would have scoffed" at the idea of pursuing such a probe, he added.

Combined efforts

Critics say Karzai's initiatives are meant to appease the international community. "It's all a show," lawmaker Sayed Rahman said, noting that no senior government official has been imprisoned on corruption charges.

Over the past year, U.S. officials said, Afghan investigators have assembled evidence against three Karzai-appointed provincial governors accused of embezzlement or bribery. All three cases have been blocked. The interference has persisted, officials said, despite Karzai's pledge in November during his second inaugural address to make fighting corruption a focus of his new term.

The extent of the interference has become evident, officials said, in large part because of improvements in Afghan authorities' ability to pursue corruption cases.

Over the past two years, U.S. agencies have allied with their Afghan counterparts to create elite investigative and prosecutorial teams. Afghan applicants undergo polygraph tests in which they are asked whether they have taken bribes. Some have been sent to U.S. facilities, including the DEA academy in Quantico, to be trained.

Still, Karzai's administration has reportedly taken steps to limit the independence of these units. The U.S. official said that Aloko recently created a three-member commission to "review" the units' cases and that it has removed names of politically connected Afghans from prosecutors' files.

Nazari, Aloko's deputy, said that if others know of a list of names that have been removed, "they should bring it to us."

The long-term aim of the anti-corruption units, Kraft said, is to assemble cases in which the evidence is "so profound and well-known that the ability to get people off the hook will no longer be there."

Evidence from wiretaps

A key capability is a U.S.-provided eavesdropping system that allows Afghan investigators to intercept cellphone calls in the most populous parts of the country.

The wiretaps, approved by Afghan judges, have yielded key evidence in a growing list of embezzlement and bribery cases. U.S. officials said the wiretaps have also caught senior officials and members of parliament discussing efforts to derail certain cases.

In January, Afghan authorities raided the offices of New Ansari, a firm that has served as Afghanistan's primary link to the "hawala" money exchange system. This informal system for transferring cash overseas makes electronic tracking difficult. A second U.S. official familiar with the investigation said the firm is suspected of laundering drug money, delivering funds to insurgents and helping Afghan officials transfer tens of millions of dollars to accounts abroad.

After the raid, wiretaps picked up conversations indicating that there had been a frantic meeting involving Karzai aides at the presidential palace. U.S. officials said members of Karzai's administration as well as members of parliament held subsequent meetings with

Aloko, pressuring him to ensure that certain New Ansari executives not be charged.

Among those protected was Haji Muhammad Rafi Azimi, deputy chairman of Afghan United Bank, a subsidiary of New Ansari, U.S. officials said. On a wiretap recording, Azimi is heard discussing bribes paid to Chakari. The recorded conversations were played in open court in the trial of a lower-ranking official in the Religious Affairs Ministry, Mohammed Noor.

"It's clear to everyone involved he should be indicted and charged," a U.S. official said of Azimi. But, the official said, Azimi is "a businessman who knows a great deal about the finances of government officials."

A second U.S. official familiar with the case concurred. "What happened is a large group of very powerful people . . . went to the attorney general and told him to stand down," the official said.

Phone calls and e-mails to Azimi did not elicit any responses. Guards outside New Ansari's office in Kabul told a reporter that the site had been closed for months. They said they did not know why they were still getting paid to guard it.

Noor, a civil servant, was sentenced to 15 years in prison after being convicted in May of collecting bribe money for Chakari in Saudi Arabia and bringing it to Afghanistan. Two others in the case are awaiting trial. Azimi remains in his position at Afghan United Bank.

Aloko has announced that his office is investigating five current and former ministers, reportedly including Mohammad Ibrahim Adel, the mines minister, accused by U.S. officials of taking a \$30 million bribe from a Chinese firm. Adel stepped down, but neither he nor any other minister -- besides Chakari -- has been charged.