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Reuters

Billions spent on Afghan police but brutality, corruption prevail

By Mirwais Harooni

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KABUL - An Afghan policeman shot dead taxi driver Mohammad Jawid Amiri six month ago, for no apparent reason. According to a Kabul police official, the shooting was an accident, and the offending policeman is now behind bars.

That's news to the family of 27-year-old Amiri.

They say the only contact with the policeman they had since the shooting was when his family offered a sheep and three bags each of rice and flour as compensation, but only if the Amiris signed papers saying their son died a traffic accident, and not from gunshot wounds.

"My father tore up the papers and said he will never forget him," said Sahida, the victim's older sister. "Maybe the policeman is in prison or maybe he has been freed. We don't even know why he shot my brother."

Amiri's death is part of a expanding dossier of unresolved police violence and corruption cases that have alienated Afghans, and which calls into question the billions of dollars spent to build up civic institutions in the war-torn nation.

About \$29 billion has been spent on the Afghan police since the Taliban were ousted in late 2001, with more to come as the U.S. and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force

steps up training ahead of plans to withdraw combat troops by the end of 2014 and hand over security to Afghans.

The Afghan police force now stands at around 142,000, although desertion rates are high. But ordinary Afghans are intimidated by the force, which has high levels of drug abuse and desertion, especially when officers are posted to areas away from their home villages or find themselves unexpectedly on the frontline of the battle against Taliban insurgents.

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), the police and Afghan troops trained to date "have thus far proved unable to enforce the law, counter the insurgency or even secure the seven regions" recently handed over to them.

Police earn 10,000-13,500 Afghanis (\$212-287) a month.

That's better than most in Afghanistan which has an annual per capita income of about \$600 and where the 30 million people have an average life expectancy of 44 years.

CORRUPT, CRIMINAL

Afghans do not hold the police in high regard.

Three in five see the police as corrupt, more than a quarter have personally seen a policeman use narcotics, and more than half think filing a complaint about police misdeeds would have no effect on the situation or make it worse, according to a U.N. survey from late last year.

Resentment also runs high against police seeking bribes to pad their salary.

Ahmad Zeya Durani, 26, and his three younger brothers sell video games, mobile phone accessories, CDs and DVDs on the sidewalk at Nader Pashton market in Kabul, barely making a living. They pay police 30 Afghanis a day for the privilege.

"If you have a good income you have to pay up to 80 or 100 Afghanis each day," Durani said. "There were hundreds of peddlers in this street who all pay the police."

And it's not just corruption.

Nearly 200 policemen were accused of murder and just over 4,600 were involved of crimes in 3,026 separate cases sent to the attorney general in Kabul in year that began March 2010, said Lieutenant General Mohammad Rahim Hanifi, head of the top prosecutor's Statistics and Analysis department.

Police are also suspected of carrying out gang rapes, but arresting the offenders falls to their colleagues, who often just ignore the cases, or intimidate those seeking justice, Hanifi said.

"We have some suspects who don't come to us for investigation and we don't have the power to bring them here. It is the police who must arrest them and bring them to us," he said.

TRAINING, RECRUITMENT BLAMED

Illiteracy, low pay, relatively short training periods for new recruits, and perhaps most crucially, the potential ability to escape the law are among the main reasons experts give for police crime.

"Six weeks of training is not enough for a policeman to know his duty and how to behave with people," said former interior minister, Taj Mohammad Wardak.

But he argues that, while police crime figures are worrying, they represent only a tiny portion of a large and growing force.

Many Afghans are not convinced.

"I usually tell my friends and family not to deal with police and I had told Jawid too, because they never feel responsible for the public," said Mohammad Sharif Amiri, an older brother of dead taxi driver Jawid.