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Heratis Angered at Afghan Security Forces

By Monira Haqjo, Feroz Zia

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Residents say police and soldiers drive recklessly and extort money.

Khadija sat by the grave of her only son Sayid, crying bitterly as her husband attempted to comfort her.

“A month ago, my son was coming out of school and crossing the road when a police Ranger vehicle hit and killed him, although the traffic light was red and vehicles were supposed to stop,” said the bereaved father, who lives in Herat in western Afghanistan.

He described how he went to the police station and the local governor’s office several times, and no one there would listen to him.

“Why do they break the law if they claim to be upholding it?” he asked. “Who am I to complain to about these legalised criminals?”

His story is only one of many that reflect unhappiness with the Afghan National Army, ANA, and Afghan National Police, ANP, in Herat province. Locals say they accuse the security forces of dangerous driving, extortion, theft and even kidnapping and murder.

Mohammad Asef left his house after dark to buy bread when an ANA knocked him down.

“I saw them,” his son Omed said. “They were driving in the wrong lane and laughing, careering from side to side as they went. Their negligence put my father in hospital.”

Omed said the family did not know who to go to in order to complain, because they had no trust in any officials.

“The government protects itself using these bad people, who will ultimately lead to the collapse of the government,” he added.

Officials in Herat hospital confirmed a rise in the number of people injured in traffic accidents involving ANA and ANP vehicles. Barakatullah Mohammadi, head of the emergency ward at Herat’s regional hospital, said 15 to 20 people injured in such accidents were being admitted every week.

Other allegations levelled at the security forces include extortion by police officers posted at checkpoints.

Truck driver Mir Ahmad said everyone travelling on the road from Herat to Kandahar in the south had to pay bribes at checkpoints along the way or risk having the windows of their vehicles broken.

In some cases, he said, police “even kidnap drivers on this road and then ask for money from truck owners”.

Abdul Rauf Ahmadi, spokesman for the ANP’s Ansar Zone in western Afghanistan, noted that there had been some problems on the Herat-Kandahar road but insisted action had been taken to address them.

He said more than 150 policemen deployed on highways had been disarmed, 18 of them had been charged, and several checkpoints had been dismantled since the beginning of 2011.

In Herat itself, shopkeeper Asadullah complained about a different kind of extortion by members of the security forces who came to his store.

“They pay whatever they want for things,” he said. “If you say anything, they threaten you.”

Women in Herat are also targets for harassment, according to Karima Hussein, head of publications at the provincial department for women’s affairs.

Citing numerous complaints filed with the department, she said, “Women are often verbally insulted as they travel through the city. When women see army and police vehicles, they try to change direction. Instead of feeling secure, people feel unsafe and scared when they see military vehicles.”

Misbehaviour by police and soldiers – and the perception that they enjoy impunity – turn people against them and reduce public confidence in the authorities generally.

“If the security forces continue to behave in arbitrary behaviour without being punished, it’s likely that unemployed, uneducated opportunists will join them and go on to kill, rob and insult people with impunity,” social affairs expert Ali Ahmad Kawa said.

Herat’s police chief Sayed Aqa Saqeb said 25 officers had been penalised for misusing military equipment or insulting behaviour.

“Police headquarters in Herat, in conjunction with the national security service and the Ansar Police Zone, are working on a disciplinary plan to avoid such problems, and it will be implemented soon by a joint committee,” he said.

He said members of the committee would be stationed around the city to monitor the behaviour of members of the security forces, and the standard of their driving.