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WikiLeaks shows bribery, corruption rampant in Afghanistan

ELIZABETH A. KENNEDY

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U.S. diplomatic cables revealed Friday portray Afghanistan as rife with graft to the highest levels of government, with tens of millions of dollars flowing out of the country and a cash transfer network that facilitates bribes for corrupt Afghan officials, drug traffickers and insurgents.

Details from a vast tranche of cables released by the WikiLeaks website could further erode support for the nine-year war. After applying heavy public pressure on President Hamid Karzai to fight corruption, U.S. and NATO officials have switched to nudging him quietly so as not to undermine the very government the international community is trying to strengthen as an alternative to the Taliban.

The leaked cables also could bolster the concerns of U.S. lawmakers who have threatened to hold back aid until they are convinced the money will not end up lining the pockets of the political elite.

Karzai's spokesman, Waheed Omar, said this week that the presidential office was reviewing the documents, but that he did not believe they would strain U.S.-Afghan relations.

But a main concern in the cables appears to be Karzai himself, who emerges as a mercurial figure.

In a July 7, 2009, cable, U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry describes "two contrasting portraits" of the Afghan president.

"The first is of a paranoid and weak individual unfamiliar with the basics of nation building and overly self-conscious that his time in the spotlight of glowing reviews from the international community has passed," the cable says. "The other is that of an ever-shrewd politician who sees himself as a nationalist hero. ... In order to recalibrate our relationship with Karzai, we must deal with and challenge both of these personalities."

In early February during a meeting with a U.S. Embassy official, Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's former ambassador to Pakistan, said Karzai is deceiving all sides.

"When he sits with me, he tells me he wants the foreign troops to leave, then he tells you he wants them to stay forever, and he tells yet a third story to Islamic leaders of other countries," Zaeef said.

In another cable dated Feb. 26, 2010, Afghan Finance Minister Omar Zakhilwal said Karzai was an "extremely weak man" who was easily swayed by anyone reported even the most bizarre stories of plots against him.

A June 2008 cable wonders "which Karzai would show up for the (2009) Afghan donors conference in Paris — the erratic Pashtun politician or the rational national leader."

One area which the Americans and Karzai agreed was on Britain's shortcomings in establishing security in Helmand province. While a November 2008 cable criticizes Karzai's "fundamental leadership deficiencies" ahead of the crucial 2009 elections, it says violence and insecurity in the south of the country pose more pressing problems.

"We and Karzai agree the British are not up to the task of securing Helmand," the cable says. Afghanistan's foreign minister "expressed disappointment in the British, contending they were not ready to fight as actively as American soldiers."

Corruption in Afghanistan is portrayed as coming directly from the top. An August 2009 report from Kabul says Karzai and his attorney general "allowed dangerous individuals to go free or re-enter the battlefield without ever facing an Afghan court."

Some of the graft is believed to go on to benefit insurgent networks, according to the files. A Dec. 27, 2009, cable from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul said Paktia provincial governor Jume Khan Hamdard has been accused of arresting contractors at job sites and holding them until they pay bribes. According to the file, Hamdard also funnels money from bribes and drug and jewel smuggling operations to an insurgent network.

"Evidence collected in the case points to corruption involving U.S. funds and actively undermining the Afghan government's counterinsurgency policy," the cable said.

Much of the graft described in the cables is facilitated by one of Afghanistan's hawala money-transfer systems, New Ansari. Hawalas, which flourish in the Islamic world, are private money transfer businesses that are difficult to track because they rely on an informal network of brokers, allowing users to avoid regulatory oversight and remain anonymous.

"Afghanistan's New Ansari hawala network is facilitating bribes and other wide-scale illicit cash transfers for corrupt Afghan officials and is providing illicit financial services for narco-traffickers, insurgents, and criminals through an array of front companies in Afghanistan and the UAE," according to an Oct. 18, 2009, cable signed by Eikenberry.

The flow of money in and out of the country also was revealed to be a serious concern for the U.S.

Zakhilwal, the finance minister, said last summer that about \$4.2 billion in cash had been transferred through the airport during the past three and a half years. He said that while it was not illegal to transfer cash out of Afghanistan, officials were concerned about the amount being moved.

In an Oct. 3, 2009, cable, Eikenberry describes the U.S. predicament after meeting Ahmad Wali Karzai, the president's half brother who has faced widespread allegations of involvement in racketeering, drug-trafficking and assassinations of rivals. The younger Karzai denies the allegations.

"The meeting with AWK highlights one of our major challenges in Afghanistan: how to fight corruption and connect the people to their government, when the key government officials are themselves corrupt," Eikenberry writes.

The cables also allege Iranian influence in Afghanistan, including political meddling and training insurgents. On Feb. 2, Karzai's chief of staff, Umar Daudzai, told U.S. Embassy officials that the Iranians "no longer even bother to deny their support for the Taliban."