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Afghan Investors Scared by Kidnapping Wave

By Mina Habib

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Businessmen suspect they make easy targets for organised criminals linked to government.

Afghan police and relatives of powerful officials have been linked to a wave of kidnapping and killing that threatens to scare away investors vital to economic recovery.

When Shour Niazi, a trader, was kidnapped in the capital Kabul on January 20, it was by armed men in the uniform of the National Security Directorate, the domestic intelligence agency.

Once inside the vehicle, they pulled a black mask over his face and drove him to a building where he was detained and beaten every day, while the kidnappers demanded a three million US dollar ransom from his family.

“When they realised they wouldn’t get the money, they wanted to kill me,” Niazi told IWPR. “I made a hole in the wooden ceiling of the room and escaped. I then informed the police, who arrested some of them.”

Niazi has little confidence the men will be punished. He says suspects in such cases are always released.

Kidnappings are nothing new in Afghanistan, but some fear the problem is escalating ahead of the 2014 withdrawal of American forces.

The Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, ACCI, says 85 of its members have been killed or abducted since late March 2011, 20 more than in the preceding 12 months.

Ahmad Shah Hakimi, deputy chairman of the Kabul Chamber of Commerce, believes police were complicit in an attack on his entourage while he was transporting three million dollars last July.

The assailants attempted to kidnap Hakimi and his brother, and killed two of his bodyguards. Although the abduction attempt failed, they made off with the money, held in a box inside Hakimi's vehicle.

The circumstances of the attack made him suspicious.

“If government officials are not supporting these groups, how come they were able to kill two of my bodyguards and steal my money close to a police checkpoint?” he asked.

ACCI vice-chairman Khan Jan Alokozay told IWPR that his organisation believes senior officials and their relatives, rather than insurgent groups or ordinary criminals, are involved,

“These are officials who have positions in the government. High ranking officials support them and they use government facilities,” he alleged.

When the perpetrators of abductions are arrested, Alokozay says they are often released soon afterwards on the orders of corrupt officials.

“There are documents and evidence available that indicate that some kidnappers have been released by the legal and judicial authorities,” he said.

Alokozay said criminal proceedings against suspected kidnappers had been derailed by interference in Paktia and Logar provinces, and in Jalalabad city in Nangarhar province, all in eastern areas of Afghanistan.

“Investment has fallen by 30 percent because of these factors,” he added.

Alokozay said police were currently under pressure to release a man arrested last month for alleged involvement in a kidnapping. The pressure, he said, was being exerted by the suspect's brother, a member of the Meshrano Jirga or upper house of parliament.

General Mohammad Zaher, head of criminal investigations at Kabul police headquarters, acknowledged that this was the case but insisted the force would not be swayed.

“The senator is exerting pressure on us to release his brother,” he said. “We have never released a criminal because he is a someone's relative or client, nor will we ever do so.”

The general insisted the police had a good record on solving abduction cases.

“The police have acted successfully in every kidnapping case, and have arrested the criminals with all due haste,” he said.

His predecessor in the post, however, conceded that some members of the Afghan National Police had taken part in kidnappings.

“When I was head of criminal investigations at Kabul police headquarters, I arrested about seven police officers for involvement in such cases,” Sayed Abdul Ghafar Sayedzada, now director of criminal investigations at the Afghan interior ministry, said.

Sayedzada said the courts needed to make more of an effort to ensure suspects were prosecuted.

“I would urge the legal and judicial bodies to act swiftly and seriously in solving these cases,” he said.

Officials at the prosecution service and Supreme Court declined to be interviewed on these matters.

Economists warn that increasing lawlessness targeting businesses is bad news. With international aid expected to decline following the withdrawal, domestic economic activity will become increasingly important. But crime and poor security could prompt an exodus of investors and their capital.

Economist Hekmat Samsor says poor security and suspicions of official complicity in criminality is already hitting businesses hard.

“When investors are kidnapped or assassinated, and when they don’t feel safe, they will undoubtedly freeze their capital and transfer it abroad,” he said. “I’ve personally witnessed the closure of dozens of companies and factories. They have all stopped working for this one reason.”

Businessman Babrak Sherzai is among those now considering leaving because of the lack of protection.

“Over the past decade, investors have faced many problems – interference by neighbouring countries, extortion by police on the highways, kidnapping, and assassination – yet the government has done nothing about it,” he said. “If security cannot be guaranteed for our capital, for ourselves and for our families, we will have to move abroad.”

After his kidnap experience, Niazi is considering leaving Afghanistan for a safer environment.

“I don’t think I will be able to continue living in this country under these circumstances,” he said. “I have to think of other options that will allow me to survive.”