IWPR

Tracking Down Afghan Kidnappers

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Reporter encounters fear and evasive behaviour while investigating crimes.

On my way home from work one day, I was on a Kabul bus listening to my fellow-passengers chat about the current spate of robberies and kidnappings. They said that far from trusting the police, they believed that some security officers and senior government officials were involved in these crimes.

I was intrigued by this, as public faith in the Afghan government and its armed forces seems to have steadily decreased over the past ten years.

One passenger, aged about 50, turned to the rest of us and said, “There are even ministers involved in these things.”

As evidence, he described a recent kidnapping in the upscale Kabul neighbourhood of Wazir Akbar Khan.

“It happened in between two security checkpoints,” he said. “Two people were killed and two others injured. The police were just watching. The kidnappers’ car, which was followed by another, somehow drove into an alley that belongs to a high-ranking government official. The rest of the time, people can’t even go in their on foot.”

When I next went to the IWPR office, I put the idea to my editor, who encouraged me to write an article about the issue.

Pursuing stories like this is not without risk, but I did not want to give up on it.

My first interview was with a trader, Shur Niazi, who managed to escape from the men who kidnapped him.

I found Niazi in a corridor at Kabul police headquarters, one of his hands still cuffed with the chain which the kidnappers had used to hold him.

Four of the alleged kidnappers were there, as were two eyewitnesses, their faces wrapped in scarves to conceal their identities.

"These are very dangerous people," one of the witnesses told me. "It will be a real problem if they recognise you."

Although Niazi had escaped his ordeal, he did not look happy.

"Living in this country means taking a chance with one's life," he said. "For this reason, many traders and investors – including myself – have moved their families and their capital outside the country."

Niazi said that if the perpetrators of such crimes were punished severely, others would be deterred from carrying out similar acts – but he did not think this would happen.

"When a thief, kidnapper or murderer is released in return for a cash bribe, or because they have connections with powerful people, it only encourages others," he said.

As I left the police station, the kidnappers looked at me with hostility.

Not everyone who had been through a kidnapping was as courageous as Niazi.

Another merchant who had been abducted kept me waiting for a week, broke several appointments to meet, and ultimately refused to be interviewed. Speaking by phone, he said it was just too dangerous.

"Interviews won't do any good. They will only expose us further and make us more vulnerable, because these kidnappers are not ordinary people," he said. "You should be careful as well, because you are a woman, and they can create all kind of trouble for you."

I did manage to interview the victim of an attempted kidnapping, Ahmad Shah Hakimi, deputy head of the Kabul Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He escaped, but two of his bodyguards, who were also relatives of his, were killed, and two of his brothers were wounded.

The assailants also stole a large sum of money.

Although he initially refused an interview, Hakimi eventually agreed to talk to me at a safe location.

“How is it possible for someone to attack you in the middle of a main road between two security checkpoints, kill people and take away three million US dollars?” Hakimi asked. “It’s obvious these people enjoy solid support from high-ranking government officials.”

In Niazi’s case, one of the suspects arrested for the kidnapping was the brother of a member of the Meshrano Jirga, the upper house or senate in Afghanistan’s parliament.

I tried to contact the politician, but when I finally got through, the person on the other end asked, “Who are you? First tell me your full name so I can write it down.”

When I identified myself, the response was, “Do not pursue such matters. What if you get kidnapped yourself?”

That did scare me, since the area where I live is not particularly safe. That night, I received a phone call from an unknown number, and the caller told me, “You’re working on some very dangerous issues. Try not to include the name of the senator, otherwise you’ll find yourself in trouble.”

I immediately contacted the criminal investigation department at Kabul police headquarters and informed them about the call I had received.

“It’s good that you told us about this,” an officer told me. “These individuals have also threatened the head of the criminal investigation department. Don’t worry – and contact us if you have any more trouble.”

The next day, I went to see criminal investigations chief Mohammad Zaher, who was working on the Niazi kidnapping case.

When I asked him about allegations that police are implicated in some kidnappings and robberies, he got very angry, protesting, “It isn’t fair to accuse police of being involved.”

He confirmed that the police had been pressured to release the kidnapper with political connections.

“The senator phoned me and asked me to release her brother,” he said, adding that the pressure stopped once he made it clear that this attempted interference might implicate the politician as well.

As I researched the story, I came across accusations that criminals had been released by the attorney general’s office, so I decided to get a response from it, too.

I made repeated visits to the offices of Afghanistan’s chief prosecutor, Attorney General Mohammad Ishaq Aloko, but no one there was prepared to be interviewed.

Eventually, I waited for two hours until deputy attorney general Abdol Wakil Amini arrived at his office. When I asked him to comment, he said angrily, “This is nothing to do with me. You should go to Sayed Jalal in the administrative department of the attorney’s office.”

When I approached Jalal, he was equally displeased. “You can contact the National Directorate for Security about it,” he told me, even though the allegations did not relate to that agency.

I went back to the attorney general’s office. I asked Aloko’s secretary for an appointment, but I was told he had just come back from a meeting at the presidential palace and was tired, so he needed a three-hour rest period.

I was taken aback at this and told the official I would include this in the article.

“You can do whatever you want,” he told me. “Write that the rest period was six hours.”

I realised that officials simply did not want to talk to me, and were putting me off with endless excuses.

It took all my patience to finish the story and overcome the many obstacles put in my way – but I did so in the end.

Since my article was published, prosecutors have summoned the politician whose brother was implicated in Shur Niazi’s abduction and questioned her about her possible role in it. The attorney general has also written to the Meshrano Jirga about the case.