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## For Afghan Officials, Facing Prospect of Death Is in the Job Description

By AZAM AHMED

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There are so many ways for an Afghan official to die: car bombs, suicide attacks, a volley of bullets or, in the case of one particularly enterprising assassin, a handgun hidden in the sole of a shoe.

On Thursday, a **Taliban** suicide bomber with a bomb hidden in his groin area tried to assassinate the new chief of Afghanistan's intelligence service in Kabul, seriously wounding him. Two weeks before, insurgents welcomed two of the country's newest governors with an armed assault in Helmand Province and a car bomb that leveled an entire city block in Wardak Province. Both governors survived and came away with an attribute essential for politicians here: a sharpened sense of fatalism.

"Assassination attempts are a part of the job," said Abdul Majid Khogyani, the new Wardak governor, seated in a makeshift office in his compound's frigid courtyard, the only place untouched by the bombing. "It comes with the package." He actually grinned.

Government officials here do not worry so much about the wrath of constituents; a more immediate fear is coldblooded assassination at the hands of the Taliban. Public service jobs are among the most dangerous in Afghanistan, with hundreds of officials killed every year. The more important the official, the greater the risk — some particularly fortunate, and well defended, governors have survived more than a dozen assassination attempts.

In the last few years, the Taliban have stepped up their campaign against politicians, targeting dozens of provincial and district governors, police chiefs and even marginal officials. It has been an effective tool, demonstrating the insurgents' power to inflict chaos and sow fear among government supporters. Last year, assassinations claimed 304 lives, the most since 2001, according to a United Nations report.

Barring the remote possibility of a peace agreement with the Taliban, the killings are only likely to rise as the American-led military coalition withdraws its combat forces over the next two years.

Perhaps the most favored targets are the 34 provincial governors, most of whom are far from the relatively secure enclave of Kabul. Appointed by the president, governors are often the highest-ranking officials most Afghans will ever see.

If the persistence of attacks suggests a high-priority target, Gulab Mangal, the former governor of Helmand Province, is a Taliban trophy. Mr. Mangal survived 17 deadly attacks in his five years in office, including a rocket attack on a helicopter, before he was replaced this year by President Hamid Karzai.

“Even my friends asked me to quit,” he said, emitting a burst of laughter. “But I loved my job and slowly, as time went on, I grew fearless.”

Not all politicians are so fortunate. Last year, a suicide bomber with explosives in his turban killed the mayor of Kandahar. This spring, the former governor of Uruzgan was fatally gunned down. A man wearing a police uniform with a suicide bomb vest underneath killed Gen. Daoud Daoud, the police commander who oversaw security in nine northern provinces, last year. The year before, insurgents killed the governor of Kunduz Province by bombing the mosque where he prayed.

Though some assassinations are carried out for personal reasons, most are political. Despite the risks, governorships have retained their allure. While the position pays an average of only \$23,000 a year, the job affords great power, and abundant opportunities for patronage and corruption.

And after three decades of war — with the Soviets, among themselves or against the Taliban — some Afghans say they have become inured to the threat of death.

“The mind-set we have in Afghanistan is different,” said Farid Mamundzay, a deputy minister at the Independent Directorate of Local Governance. “We see people dying on a weekly if not daily basis. We’ve gotten used to it.”

“If you die, you die,” he added.

Still, politicians take security seriously, spending vast amounts, sometimes from their own pockets, and often taking a direct role in their self-preservation.

“I should know personally every individual who is serving me as a security guard,” insisted Abdul Jabar Taqwa, the governor of Kabul, tightening his right fist, which is knotted with white scars from burns from a 2011 bomb attack.

In Parwan Province, just north of Kabul, Gov. Abdul Basir Salangi has survived three attacks during his four years as governor. Asked how, he reached over to the side of his desk and produced a loaded assault rifle.

“I take this with me everywhere,” he said, nestling the gun against his shoulder. “To the office, to my home, everywhere.”

A former jihadi commander during the war against the Soviets, he knows how to use it, his staff members say, and is more than happy to do so. When six suicide bombers stormed the gates of his compound last year, he looked out his office window, spotted an insurgent and shot him in the face.

The bombers killed 22 people. Mr. Salangi keeps the grisly images of the attack in his office, a banquet hall-style room with seven gold and glass chandeliers and a faux fireplace.

“The enemy is always watching us,” he said. “If they find a single opportunity, they will take it.”

Leaving the job hardly guarantees one’s safety. “I’m a target even now,” said Mr. Mangal, who left his post in Helmand this year. Only now he has less security.

Mr. Mangal was deeply unpopular with insurgents in Helmand for his efforts to eradicate opium poppy cultivation, a lucrative business that helps finance the Taliban and other entrenched interests. Six armed men guard his Kabul home, with several more posted behind a concrete reinforced door and another guard in front of the house.

His family never grew accustomed to the constant attacks.

“Before he was a governor, we had a normal, happy life,” said Muhammad Anwar, his oldest son, a university student. “We would have preferred him to have a smaller but secure job, where he was safe and we were, too.”

Mr. Khogyani, the governor of Wardak, was at all times surrounded by a dozen armed men, part of the group of 50 who protect his compound. He has so far refused to accept assistance from the local police chief, fearful of corruption. Instead, he foots the bill himself, paying the sons of his former mujahedeen comrades to serve as his security detail.

Mr. Khogyani walked slowly around his bombed-out compound, detailing the wreckage with a strange mix of fear and pride: his bedroom, where the roof had lifted from the house; his kitchen, collapsed in a heap of steel and brick; his wooden bed frame, in splinters, tossed 10 yards from the house to rest by a fountain.

He climbed atop the remnants of a wall along the edge of the yard. Beyond it, everything within 100 yards of the blast was leveled: a midwifery, the bureau of statistics, an entire block of homes.

Asked whether he considered revenge, he paused, then shook his head.

“I have accepted that one day I will die,” he said. “If my time is up, no one will save me.”