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Looted goods from Nato trucks end up in Peshawar market

*Equipment, cards, certificates of promotion get sold in black market
Political agent says involvement of Khasadar troops can't be ruled out*

By Omer Farooq Khan

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PESHAWAR: The goods looted from US and Nato supply convoys en route to military bases in Afghanistan, often land in a black market in Peshawar, a city that has earned fame for dealing in smuggled items from the West, at cheap prices.



Sitara Market, on the outskirts of Peshawar, just at the doorstep to the Khyber tribal region, is known for its smuggled goods. The merchandise, meant for use by US and Nato forces stationed in Afghanistan, ultimately lands in Peshawar's black market, where local vendors claim that these smuggled items come from Afghanistan, Balochistan and from the Tribal Areas.

Military uniforms, shoes, pistol cases, knives, fibre-glass containers, jerry-cans, air conditioners, medicine kits, food items, books, portable furniture, hiking kits, binoculars and other multi-purpose apparatus finds its way into various shops in Sitara Market.

Even certificates of promotion, private family letters, cards and photographs are available for sale. Ten family photographs or cards are sold for a dollar. "Buy some cards and enjoy 'sexy' conversation," is how one bearded vendor invites illiterate youth to buy birthday and Christmas cards. The cards, which had been sent to US soldiers by family members and dear ones, ultimately reach the bedrooms of frustrated youth. One of the cards sent by a mother to her son reads, "Hello sweet man. Hugs, kisses and lots of love from your mom. Miss you bunches! You are in my thoughts and prayers daily. Your Mom!"

The certificates of promotion of US soldiers and books are displayed in one dilapidated shop in Sitara Market. The shopkeeper is selling only the plastic covers of these certificates for Rs 200 each (less than three dollars). Some of the best novels, biographies and warfare books, with price tags ranging from \$ 20 to \$ 80 are available at much cheaper rates than the plastic covers.

Books in paperback binding are sold for Rs 100 while Rs 200 are charged for the ones in hardback binding. Vendors in the market are mostly local tribesmen from the Khyber tribal region while a number of them are Afghan nationals. Most of the vendors consider the US and Nato goods as booty, which they term maal-e-ghaneemat.

When asked how these items end up in the market, the local shopkeepers furnished different answers.

"Although US goods are looted when gunmen attack US supply convoys or when full containers are stolen, yet the most modern method employed by the mafia is used to open the seal of a regular container carrying these goods. Having done their job, they hire people who restore these containers in a way that the seal-break is undetectable," said a salesman on condition of anonymity.

A long chain of people, including local tribesmen, militants, tribal security forces, local businessmen and truck drivers are involved in the looting and smuggling of these US and Nato goods, say local residents. The government has formed 11

checkposts on a 44-kilometre road between Peshawar and Torkham on the Afghan border and around 300 tribal security personnel, called the Khasadar Force, are deployed to ensure the safe passage of people as well as US and Nato supplies, say Shafeerullah Khan Wazir, political agent of the Khyber tribal region. Yet, the militants who exist in large numbers in the area succeed in attacking the US and Nato convoys, he added.

“I do not rule out the involvement of some of the Khasadars in looting these convoys but the main facilitators in this dangerous scenario are the truck drivers and the conductors. We have arrested a number of them who were found guilty of being involved in these ventures,” Khan states.

In the past three years, US and Nato supply convoys were repeatedly attacked in Peshawar and Khyber Agency. These attacks are a major source for the US equipment that ends up in Peshawar’s Sitara Market, say Nisar Afridi, another local businessman.

But there are other avenues as well, said local vendors. Most of these items are brought from Afghanistan by traders who specialise in smuggling across the border.

A shopkeeper dealing in electronic appliances in Sitara Market says that he brought all his merchandise from Kabul. Regarding the equipment used by foreign troops, he says, the soldiers gifted the items to the locals working with them, who then sold these in the market. An official of the Afghan Transit Trade, asking not to be named, said, however, that the goods for sale in Peshawar and different markets in Afghanistan had been stolen from containers carrying supplies for coalition soldiers in Afghanistan.