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City of shame - and hope

By William Marsden

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Just off embassy row in the centre of Kabul is a neighbourhood called Sherpur. It's also spelled Sher Poor, but that's simply an irony. Because, aside from the streets, which in some places rival rutted mountain passes, there is nothing poor about Sherpur.

Behind the stone and concrete walls that frame the neighbourhood are marbled villas and mansions. They were built over the last five years by the warlords, drug traffickers, politicians, ministers, bankers and other businessmen who have grown rich off the heroin trade or the billions of dollars in foreign aid that has streamed into Afghanistan since 2002.



President Hamid Karzai's legacy: Sherpur Poppy Gardens, the seat of Afghanistan's power elite

Sometimes referred to as the Poppy Garden, Sherpur is the seat of Afghanistan's power elite.

There is no mistaking the wealth, no attempt to conceal it. The buildings represent an eclectic grouping of European architecture – Italianesque, French rococo, neo-classical or just plain flaky-esque (one has a giant golden eagle adorning the roof) – purposely designed to stick out like a fat diamond, a choking wad of cash or a defiant middle finger to the world.

Outside these bunkered homes is a different world where open sewers trickle through bombed out neighbourhoods and destitute children play amid the persistent rubble of 30 years of war.

About 84 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP is foreign aid, yet touring Kabul is proof that the vast majority of Afghans have not felt its benefits.

Few roads are paved. Many are hard-packed mud and stone, or so deeply potholed they represent more of an obstacle course than a thoroughfare. Traffic flows like water. It takes the path of least resistance. Drivers drive on the wrong side of boulevards, fearlessly veering into oncoming traffic or turning the wrong way on roundabouts. The few traffic lights that exist often don't work and most street cops are illiterate and can't read a licence plate, never mind write a ticket.

The soccer stadium, where the Taliban once executed prisoners for halftime entertainment, awaits new turf and the poor gather at the nearby Shohada Cemetery to water down the dust on the graves, hoping relatives or friends will pay them for their trouble.

Kabul businessman Hasib Sayed, 30, who is also Canadian with a home in Toronto, said he comes to the cemetery occasionally to hand out money.

"Corruption is part of life here," he said. "Anybody who thinks there is a fix for that, I think is unrealistic. It will have its cycle and eventually go away."

"You have to understand that after 30 years of war these old men who run the country don't know anything else. These are not politicians. These are bullies. It will eventually come to an end and a new generation we are hoping will change things and think of the future and not just the present."

But at present, he said, "everybody is trying to milk everything to the best of their ability. It's the feeling that now is our chance, so let's make it. There is no faith in the future. It's very negative. We have to get rid of this negativity."

Sayed said he puts his hope in the emerging generation of Afghans who are well educated and not part of the old tribal ways.

But Habib Zahori, 28, a writer and journalist and part of that new generation, disagrees.

"It is very difficult now to get rid of these warlords, these criminals," he said in an interview. "At

the beginning the Afghans had a golden chance to bring these criminals to justice, including the Taliban, but they lost that opportunity. I believe this country is going towards another civil war, much bloodier and much uglier.

“Americans brought more weapons to this country. I believe as soon as the government collapses, the army and police will divide into two factions each, down the middle, with one side joining the Taliban and the other side joining the warlords.”

He added that he expects the Americans will lose interest in Afghanistan after the 2012 presidential election. “And if the Americans leave, I don’t think any other European country will stay here. I am so worried about my family, especially my three sisters in Kabul. I might send my family to Quetta in Pakistan to live with my mom’s parents.”

Both men are well schooled in the ways of Afghanistan.

As a teenage boy, Zahori said he was once forced to watch a Taliban execution at the soccer stadium.

“How did that make you feel? Were you shocked?

“No. I had lived through the civil war.”

Corruption has crept into every corner of Afghan life. Everybody here complains about it because everybody experiences it.

A police officer seeking promotion often has to bribe his superior. To finance that bribe he taxes his patrolmen who in turn tax the public. Kabul’s dozens of police and army checkpoints – some mobile, others permanent – serve as bribe collection points. The money goes right up the chain of command.

Students pay bribes to gain access to the best university faculties and for the right to study abroad.

These, however, are only the fringes of a corrupt society. The real money is at the centre of power.

The Kabul Bank, which processed wages for government employees, last year crashed after about \$900 billion U.S. vanished into undocumented non-interest loans to 207 insiders. The fall almost ruined Afghanistan’s struggling \$12-billion economy. Recipients of these loans reportedly included top government officials such as President Hamid Karzai’s brother Mahmood Karzai. Both the bank’s former executive director and its board chairmen were charged last month and another 38 people are under investigation.

The government took action only after pressure from the International Monetary Fund and members of the International Security Assistance Force. Karzai’s reluctance to pursue the case probably stemmed from the fact that many of the loans went to government officials close to

Karzai.

Certain businesses in Afghanistan are considered off-limits to all but a handful of insiders. Foremost among them is the fuel business. This includes securing the transportation of oil to major ISAF bases throughout the country. To assure the deliveries remain secure, a sort of oil mafia bribes insurgents not to attack these strategically important supplies. (Rare are the reports of fuel shipments being attacked.) In this way, ISAF money helps finance the insurgency.

“You don’t dare touch oil unless you are one of about four or five guys,” Sayed said.

Sayed has various small businesses in Afghanistan that include a bus company that recently won a contract to operate buses in the virtual NATO city that is the Kandahar Airfield.

His experience with the bus company reflects the sort of corrupt behaviour businessmen have to contend with, even when dealing with relatively small-scale contracts.

When he won the contract, he said, his competitor telephoned his employees warning them that “if they take any buses into Kandahar, (the employees) will be made to disappear.” A worker confirmed this story to Postmedia News.

In another case, Sayed said, when he lured a key employee away from his competitor, the competitor bribed police to charge the employee with the theft of fuel and tires. The complaint was not launched in Kandahar, where the competitor alleged the crimes were committed, but in a small police station in Kabul.

“I spent an entire day in the police station trying to get him out,” Sayed said. “At one point, one of the police officers took me aside and told me that my competitor had paid \$6,000, bribing the police officers to arrest and imprison this employee.”

But Sayed had his own card to play. He has an uncle who is a senior official in government and has ties to the National Security Directorate, which is Afghanistan’s domestic intelligence agency.

“The NSD is the only clean department in this government,” Sayed said. “But only because they are well paid.”

He said that one mention of his relative freed the employee.

“In this country it depends on who has more power,” he said with a smile.

In another incident, police once beat him up because he was filming them with his cellphone as they beat up a cyclist. Sayed said they stopped beating him only after he yelled the name of his uncle at the NSD. He said they took him to their police post, which was a shipping container, and tried to persuade him not to tell his relative.

“You see, it’s like a family,” he said. “ ‘Don’t tell daddy.’ ...

“One of the policemen was sleeping in a bunk and leaned over and asked me, ‘What’s the matter? Haven’t you ever been beaten up before? … Now stop talking and let me sleep.’ ”

After the police returned his cellphone, they gathered around to watch the video of them beating up the cyclist. “One of them asked me to replay some portions because he couldn’t see himself. When I asked them why they beat up the cyclist, they said it was because he wouldn’t get off his bicycle.”

Kabul has grown enormously in the last decade to 4.5 million people, from less than 2 million, as a need for security and jobs forces families into the city.

About 80 per cent of the population lives in so-called “informal settlements” of squatters, according to the World Bank.

Men like Sayed, however, see hope in the tremendous business potential that exists in national reconstruction. The fact that there has been so little of it only expands the possibilities.

The shame of corruption that casts a shadow over Kabul is countered by the hope evident in the resilient spirit of the city’s artisans, artists and small manufacturers.

Many bombed-out structures have become homes to dry goods stores, food stalls, butchers, mechanics, ironmongers and tiny manufacturing operations, as entrepreneurs use just about anything they can get their hands on to build businesses. On any given day, the old part of the city is filled with pedlars and shoppers.

Journalism is energetic and fearless. Radio and television have regular talk shows where Afghans speak out about social, political and artistic issues.

In Kabul today, the talk of the town concerns the new Tolo TV comedy series called The Ministry. It’s about a vain and pompous Minister of Garbage in the fictitious and very grim country of Hechland (the Dari word for “nothing land”).

The show is considered the Afghan version of Ricky Gervais’s hit The Office. In the opening segments, we learn that the minister’s secretary hates men and that his daily grind consists of having to deal with a member of parliament who wants 10 armoured cars for his personal protection, another who wants authorization for a drug-trafficking business and a third who wants government jobs for his family.

Like all good comedy, it reflects the wrenching reality of Kabul – a city of shame. But the TV show’s very existence represents hope.