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Afghanistan Plans to Indict Officials

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KABUL—Afghan prosecutors are planning to indict nearly two dozen current and former senior officials—the current mining minister among them—on allegations of taking bribes and stealing government funds, Afghan officials said.

If the indictments proceed, the suspects would be the highest-ranking Afghan officials charged with corruption, despite years of allegations from Western officials and domestic critics of widespread graft in President Hamid Karzai's administration.

The U.S., which has pressed Mr. Karzai to make tough moves against corrupt officials, said any prosecutions were welcome, although the U.S. Embassy said it couldn't comment on specific cases.

But some U.S. officials privately were skeptical. No indictments have been handed down, they said, and noted there has been little movement on a number of major corruption cases that touch directly on the president's inner circle. Those are considered a higher priority, at least by Washington, they said.

U.S. and other Western officials have for years accused Mr. Karzai of trying to scuttle investigations into high-level corruption, which they fear has turned Afghans against his government and fueled the Taliban insurgency.

But the U.S. and its allies, which have spent millions setting up Afghan anticorruption task forces, have struggled with how to tackle the problem. Direct and public pressure on Mr. Karzai has most often resulted in ugly public spats with the Afghan leader; private pressure has most often been brushed off, the officials said.

Mr. Karzai and his top officials, for their part, have maintained they are doing all they can about corruption, arguing evidence presented in the past by Western officials wasn't substantial enough to warrant criminal charges.

Deputy Attorney General Rahmatullah Nazari said Sunday that some of the 20 former and current officials facing possible indictments have been under investigation for years. Most are former officials, he said, although the number includes at least one sitting Cabinet minister. The group also includes a former provincial governor and a serving senior officer in the Afghan army.

The indictments are being considered only now because of a special court, set up in late summer, charged with hearing cases against Cabinet ministers and other senior officials, he said. The specially designated court is required by Afghanistan's constitution to try high-ranking officials.

"The investigations are complicated," he said in an interview Sunday. "We didn't have the special court we needed."

One of the most senior former officials under investigation, ex-Commerce and Industry Minister Amin Farhang, is alleged to have stolen \$19.5 million from Afghan government coffers by signing padded contracts for fuel shipped through a number of Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, Mr. Nazari said. A major portion of Afghanistan's fuel is imported through Central Asia.

Mr. Nazari said prosecutors had invoices and other documents proving Mr. Farhang siphoned off money that he claimed was being used to buy fuel. Mr. Farhang blamed the investigation on a "political conspiracy" and denied he had stolen any money.

"The Attorney General is blaming me for corruption to divert attention away from corrupt people in the government," he said in an interview.

The sitting Cabinet minister under investigation, Wahidullah Shahrani, the mining minister, is alleged to have taken bribes, an Afghan official said, declining to discuss specifics of the case.

The minister's father, Nematullah Shahrani, who advises Mr. Karzai on Islamic affairs, is also facing a possible indictment for allegedly taking bribes when he was the minister of the Hajj, the pilgrimage Muslims take to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the religion's holiest city, the official said.

The Attorney General's office didn't offer any formal comment on the investigation on the Shahrani, both of whom declined to discuss the allegations.

Despite Washington's eagerness to see Mr. Karzai tackle corruption on his own, some U.S. officials were cautious about the latest cases. Apart from the fact no indictments have been handed down, they also pointed out that most of those facing possible indictment were former, not current, officials, all of whom had been forced out of unelected offices, meaning they had likely fallen out of political favor with Mr. Karzai.

"If you want to be cynical, you could see these as the expendables," the official said.

The official cited Mr. Farhang as one of that group. Mr. Farhang served for years in Mr. Karzai's government, rising to be commerce minister. But he wasn't renominated for that or any other post after Mr. Karzai's re-election last year.