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Corruption a way of life in Afghanistan

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In the Afghan capital's department of motor vehicles, the simple act of registering a car can turn into days, even weeks, of waiting and frustration. Unless you pay off the right people.

Mohammad Zarif Formolly had been waiting for a month to obtain documentation for his vehicle. Another man, who identified himself only as Jamaludin, traveled 50 miles from Logar province and had been waiting for three days.

The chaotic outdoor space that passes for a waiting area was teeming with "agents," men who make sure bribe money reaches the right government offices and the paperwork gets done. Some, desperate for work, want their business to become a legal profession.

An agent named Jamil said he doesn't view his deeds as crimes because ultimately, he is helping Afghans obtain documents faster. For a Toyota Corolla, he charges about \$300, a hefty sum in Afghanistan, where the median income is only \$800 a year.

But this is the way things are done here.

Ridding Afghanistan of rampant corruption was a key issue in this year's national election, itself mired in allegations of fraud.

President Hamid Karzai's challengers charged that there had been widespread voter intimidation while investigating agencies found evidence of rigged votes.

But Karzai has said that fighting graft is a top priority and the United States has made it clear that it has high expectations the Afghan government as 30,000 more American troops prepare to make their way to the troubled land. The battle over hearts and minds cannot be won if the Afghan people constantly feel cheated by their own government, U.S. officials have said.

"We will support Afghan ministries, governors, and local leaders that combat corruption and deliver for the people," said President Obama earlier this month in a speech that laid out the future of U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan.

"We expect those who are ineffective or corrupt to be held accountable," he said.

At a recent anti-corruption conference, Karzai called the situation in his homeland embarrassing.

"Until we can provide the people the peace of mind that we will defend them against corruption, we will not succeed," he said.

Karzai said he has fired corrupt officials already and that he is prepared to act against anyone proven to be breaking the law.

But the U.S. watchdog Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said in a report issued this week that Afghanistan's newly created office to fight corruption is weak, incompetent and influenced by powerful politicians.

And, for now at least, there were few signs of work stoppage for the so-called agents at the motor vehicle registration office. Even as an angry police officer showed up.

"None of the agents have a permit," he said. "What they are doing is illegal."

The officer said the agents use some of the \$300 to actually pay for the registration fee. A share goes to pay off government officials and the rest they stash in their own pockets.

But the officer said many of the agents are phonies and take off with the money.

Jamaluddin, the man who had been waiting for three days, said he had already paid \$700 but with no results. He probably gave the money to a phony agent.

The key question for the Karzai government now is whether corruption so endemic can be successfully eradicated.

The police officer provided some insight: He said he didn't like what he was seeing. But he wasn't about to do anything about it either.