Barriers Prove Insurmountable for Karzai

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The Afghan president has not been able to enforce his order to remove security barriers in the capital, leading many to wonder how much authority he really has.

Motorists in Kabul face a number of hazards, from overcrowded streets to the increasing number of novice drivers on the roads. But what they complain about most are the heavy concrete barriers strategically placed so as to protect embassies, the offices of international aid organisations and the homes of the powerful.

The roadblocks have turned the city’s streets into an obstacle course which few drivers are able to master.

President Hamed Karzai thought he had fixed the problem when he issued a decree on January 1 ordering all the concrete barriers to be removed. He gave those who had blocked off access to their offices or homes one week to remove the barriers themselves, or else, he warned, the government would do it for them.

Six weeks have passed since he issued his ultimatum, and the barriers remain in place.

According to Abdul Shakoor Khair Khwa, head of the national traffic police, there are about 46 areas in Kabul where roads have been blocked by barriers, resulting in traffic jams, long delays and short tempers. He said that the police, working through the interior ministry, had petitioned the president many times to take action.

Now, presidential order in hand, Khair Khwa is eager to get down to work.

“We are determined to put this decree into practice, and we will not listen to any objections,” he told IWPR. “We bear responsibility for the traffic system and we are going to remove all the barriers from the roads. Those who are concerned for their security should talk to the police – they can ensure safety.”

But his words so far have not translated into action. First there was heavy snow, then the Eid-ul-Adha holiday. The concrete blocks are still in place.

Foreign organisations have taken a firm stand, citing Afghanistan’s notoriously fragile security situation. Some have threatened to pack up and leave if they lose their protective concrete.

The Asian Development Bank, ADB, is a case in point. When police removed the barriers around the bank’s offices on January 8, it promptly closed its doors. ADB mission head Brian Fawcett said that the offices would not reopen until the barriers were replaced.

“We only block the road to make it safer,” he said angrily. “We have stopped our activities in Afghanistan and will keep our office closed until we receive permission to put the barriers back.”
Traffic police chief Khair Khwa said that his agency would not bow to threats from foreign organisations. “This is an order from the president and we have to implement it,” he said. “If they have a problem, they should discuss it with high-ranking officials in the government.”

That is exactly what ADB did. By mid-February, workers were busy erecting new barriers, the street in front of the bank was once again closed, and Fawcett said that he anticipated being able to open again soon.

Nevertheless, interior ministry spokesman Mohammad Yousuf Stanikzai insists that the police will press ahead with removing the barriers.

“These barriers have no purpose except to create traffic problems,” he said. “Our decision is final. We have given [the organisations] time but they have not removed the barriers. So now we will do it ourselves.”

Asked why no barriers have yet been removed for good, Stanikzai said the government had appointed a panel to study which of them should be removed first.

The American embassy is one of the worst offenders, closing off a major thoroughfare to protect its compound. Many were keen to see what would happen when the US government and Kabul police squared off.

Officials at the embassy say that they have not received any formal instruction to open the roads leading to the mission.

“Ensuring the safety of our staff in Afghanistan is one of our highest priorities. The United States and Afghanistan routinely discuss measures to provide appropriate protection for the US embassy and military facilities,” said spokesperson Lou Fintor.

Interior ministry officials say privately that the American embassy will be exempt from the decree.

Ramazan Bashardost, a member of parliament and outspoken critic of both the barriers and the organisations that have erected them, is bitter about the lack of action. He had tabled an initiative in parliament to have the barriers removed, but was pre-empted by the presidential decree.

“Unfortunately, like previous Karzai decrees, this remains nothing more than a dead piece of paper,” he told IWPR. “It will not be put into practice - but I will continue my own efforts to get these barriers removed until the situation is resolved.”

Bashardost’s ire is not directed only at foreign governments and non-government organisations, NGOs. He was also quick to criticise such powerful figures as former defence minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim, who is currently serving as a presidential appointee in the Meshrano Jirga, or upper house of parliament.

“Fahim has blocked off many streets leading to his house,” fumed Bashar Dost. “This is also a cause of the problem. It is not only the embassies and the NGOs.”
Ordinary Afghans are not happy with the delay, nor are they pleased that their president seems unable to enforce a decree that affects the foreign presence in the country.

“When Karzai ordered the barriers removed people were very happy,” said Kabul resident Nisar Ahmad, 40. “We thought that now we wouldn’t be stuck in traffic for hours and hours. But now we see that no one listens to the president’s decrees.”

Habibullah, 28, also of Kabul, agreed, “Karzai’s decrees don’t have any authority even over Afghans - how can we expect them to have an impact on foreigners?”

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