

Businessmen Targeted by Kidnappers

Author: [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Running a business in Afghanistan can expose you to kidnap and murder by gangs looking for ransom.

Business leaders in Afghanistan are warning that continued lawlessness, lack of security and alleged official corruption are threatening to stifle economic development in the country.

They point to interior ministry figures showing that, over the past six months, 20 businessmen have been killed and another 16 kidnapped but released by their captors or freed by the police. So far, 50 people have been arrested and are currently awaiting trial on kidnapping charges.

Many business leaders also fear that they are vulnerable to both corrupt police officers and criminals posing as law-enforcement officials.

The fate of Hafizullah Zadran, 30, a father of five and the son of a wealthy car-engine importer, is a case in point.

On the night of December 30, Hafizullah disappeared. Shortly afterwards, his father Khalil received a demand for five million US dollars from the kidnappers.

He attempted to negotiate with the kidnappers, offering to pay 100,000 dollars for his son's release. But on February 3, Hafizullah's body was found about 20 kilometres outside Kabul.

"I never thought they would carry out their threat," said a tearful Khalil Zadran. "They only wanted the money. I would have begged and raised that cash somehow if I thought it would have saved him."

Officials with the interior ministry said there have been several arrests in the case, but Khalil Zadran warns, "If this is the situation, not only will other merchants not come to Afghanistan, but those who are here will want to move on."

Meanwhile, some businessmen said that officials responsible for providing security in the country are guilty of extortion themselves.

Haji Sher Zaman, 50, returned to his native Afghanistan three years ago after running a car spare-parts company in Holland for 25 years.

"I wanted to come home, bring my capital with me and build a business," he said. "But every step of the way has been fraught with difficulties. I had several containers of car parts sent from Holland but were broken into and items went missing.

"When I complained [to the authorities], all they did was start demanding more money - and all this after I'd all the legal duties involved.

"Some of my goods have been looted, I've been threatened with arson attacks, and everywhere there are demands for money. If security is not ensured in the short term, we will have to move our capital to other countries and invest there instead."

Abdul Haq, 30, who runs a carpet business in Kabul, said he has no confidence in the local police.

He said he recently witnessed several men dressed in police uniforms assault and rob a Pakistani carpet dealer in front of his shop.

"I do not know if they were [real] police officers or not, but they had the uniforms," he said.

Lutfullah Mashal, a spokesman for the interior ministry, acknowledged that some criminals have taken to wearing uniforms to pass themselves off as police officers.

"Unfortunately, there are many people who are not police but have bought uniforms," he said. "We have now introduced new uniforms. We have issued computerised identity cards, and banned uniforms from being put on general sale so as to reduce the number of police impersonations."

Mashal concluded, "We provide the businessman with reliable security, to give him confidence."

Hamid Qaderi, head of Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce, said security is a major problem for the private sector and investors, and that there may even be an organised effort to undermine the country's economy.

"We feel there is a disciplined movement that wants to disturb the trading and commercial atmosphere in the country, [run by] people who want neither domestic nor foreign investment in Afghanistan," he said.

But Ghulam Nabi Farahi, an under-secretary at the commerce ministry, argues that business will continue to improve despite security problems.

He said that in the last three years, his department had issued 31,000 import-export permits and 8,800 permits authorising the import of capital.

He said that in the same period, 333 factories have been established in Afghanistan, employing 15,000 Afghans.

"Businessmen shouldn't pay attention to the minor issues," he said. "The United States has problems with all sorts of crime, but trade continues."

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