Kabul Traffic Waits for Green Light

Author: Wahidullah Amani

Even if the long-promised traffic lights were put up around the Afghan capital, there would be no electricity to switch them on.

More than a year after traffic in the Afghan capital Kabul was supposed to have been tamed by traffic lights, the roads are congested worse than ever.

Even with four or five traffic policemen gesticulating at the cars and bicycles trying to shove their way across the busiest city junctions, the traffic remains at a near-standstill and it can take hours to get from one part of Kabul to another. The number of cars on the capital's roads is now estimated at 400,000 - 100,000 more than last year, when traffic police said the city could only cope with 80,000 or so.

That is not how it was supposed to be. In February 2005, the then head of Afghanistan’s traffic police force, General Abdul Shakoor Khairkhwah, told IWPR that work was well under way on installing traffic lights at some 100 intersections and roundabouts, and would be completed by the end of the following month.

It is now August 2006, but the only traffic lights to be seen in Kabul - standing at 14 intersections - were there even before Khairkhwah spoke about his ambitious plan.

The traffic authorities justify the delay by pointing out that there is little value in putting up lights if they are not going to work anyway.

Abdul Sami Nazar, who heads the Kabul traffic police department, told IWPR the installation plan was ongoing, but had been delayed by the local power authorities’ refusal to provide electricity.

The Kabul Electricity Office has a point - the Afghan traffic police have not paid their energy bills for years.

"We need electricity to activate the traffic lights, but the energy ministry wants us to pay off previous electricity charges first. We are in contact with them and will switch the lights on as soon as they supply the power," said Nazar.

Other problems contributing to the delay included the difficulty of buying the right electrical cables, added Nazar.

According to Mohammad Sarwar Sediqi, deputy head of the Kabul power authority, "The Afghan traffic department owes the energy ministry two million afghanis [40,000 US dollars] from past years. They have to pay this money first and then we will take action to supply power to the intersections and meet other needs of the traffic department. We cannot write this money off."

Sediqi said the traffic lights now standing at 14 junctions were still not fully working because the police had failed to provide the cabling.
However, apportioning blame may be academic, since Sediqi says that even if all the planned traffic lights were installed properly across the city, it would be impossible to guarantee a constant electricity supply.

“We are unable to supply power to all of the city intersections continuously. At the moment, we can supply power only to those located close to our power stations,” he said, recommending that the traffic police look into alternative energy sources such as solar power.

Police chief Nazar insisted that even when the traffic lights finally start working, the sheer volume of cars on the road means there will always be a need for the policeman on the spot trying to make order out of chaos.

“We have to have traffic police too, because lights alone cannot regulate the massive traffic," he said.

On the streets of Kabul, people told IWPR that working red stop signals would mean little to the many drivers who ignore all the rules, have never taken a test and either bought their driving license with a bribe or do not possess one at all.

"Most of these drivers are ignorant of the traffic laws, so lights aren’t going to make my job any easier,” said one traffic policeman who asked not to be named. “They don’t follow our instructions - how are they going to obey traffic lights?"

Wahidullah Amani is an IWPR staff reporter in Kabul.

Source URL: https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kabul-traffic-waits-green-light