

Kidnappings Terrify Afghan Investors

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Fears that spate of violence will further curtail much-needed investment.

Officials are warning of a crime surge across Afghanistan that is seeing rich traders and investors kidnapped at a rate of one a day.

The security forces inability to prevent the wave of violence has led some to speculate that police officers and government figures are connected to the criminals.

There are also fears that the risks involved in doing businesses in Afghanistan is seriously curtailing much-needed investment.

Sayam Pesarlai, the spokesman for Afghanistan's chamber of commerce and industries, said that investment was trailing far behind their own forecasts.

Around 60 traders and investors had been abducted over the last two months, he continued, with most of these incidents having taken place in Khost, Paktiya, Kandahar and Kunduz provinces.

While official figures are much lower, many cases are likely to have gone unreported for fear of reprisals.

Jamshid Rasoli, the spokesman for Afghanistan's attorney general's office, said that over the past nine months they had investigated nearly 100 cases of abduction and made around 200 arrests in connection.

Abdul Jalil Hareef, deputy director of Kabul's chamber of commerce and industry, told IWPR that his own son had been killed by armed men just a month previously.

Five kidnapers had ambushed Abdul Mateen Hareef, himself a wealthy father-of-four with his own company, Mateen Istiwar, outside his home at 2pm one afternoon.

"My son was killed in a confrontation with these kidnapers, who then stole his car, worth 20,000 dollars," Hareef continued.

This was not the first the family had been targeted by criminals. Hareef's eldest son was also kidnapped in 2017, but released after a month after the family paid a 550,000 dollar ransom.

Immediately after Abdul Mateen's murder, Hareef continued, he was told that the police investigation was progressing quickly and that the license plate of the attackers' car had been identified from security camera footage. However, he had heard nothing since.

Hareef argued that the government needed to establish a dedicated department to coordinate security matters with the private sector. Many kidnappings, he continued, were due to the unreliability of personnel from private security companies. If the government itself was able to ensure security, this danger might be reduced.

But beyond personal tragedy, this targeting of traders and investors would have far-reaching consequences, Hareef continued.

"If a village in a district or province falls to the militants, the government might eventually recapture it," Hareef said. "But if the private sector moves its assets out of the country, attracting these investments again will be very difficult. It will mean heavy losses for the government and the public alike."

The wave of violence has also taken its toll on ordinary citizens.

One local man, Mohammad Zaki, said that they although they heard about abductions every day in the media, there were never any reports of a kidnapper being arrested or punished.

Naseer Sultani, another Kabul resident, said, "I feel scared whenever I hear about abductions, and sometimes I think that this lack of security could pose a threat to our lives as well."

He said that one issue was the proliferation of cars with tinted windows and no license plates, often used by senior officials or local strongmen.

"Kidnapers travel openly in the city in broad daylight in these black cars with tinted windows, which also don't have license plates, but police can't arrest these kidnapers because many of them have relations to powerful people, members of parliament or government officials," he said.

The consequences can be grim for those who fail to meet their abductor's demands.

In one recent case, Kabul money changer Ahmadullah Aziz was abducted on December 29, 2017 and subsequently murdered when his ransom was not paid.

Those who agree to pay also face physical and mental trauma.

Trader Rahim Gardizi described how he was abducted and mistreated until he paid a huge ransom.

"I was tortured for three months before the kidnappers received one and a half million dollars from me," he said, adding that ensuring the safety of businessmen like him was vital for the country's growth and development.

Saihoon, an economics lecturer at Kabul university, said that administrative corruption, the absence of healthy competition in the market and the lack of support for domestic products had hampered investment in Afghanistan.

The government paid little attention to the struggles entrepreneurs faced, he continued, and the atmosphere of fear did not help.

"When kidnappers and criminals kidnap people, news of these abductions is broadcast throughout the media and news channels, but mostly no action is taken against them because powerful people and networks connected to the government are often involved," he continued. "So these kidnappers are becoming stronger and stronger and more motivated to continue to kidnap more and more people."

Musafir Qoqandi, the spokesman for the ministry of commerce and industry, said that his department liaised closely with the security forces to protect traders and investors around the country.

"The government pays a great deal of attention to development and investment," he continued, although he declined to give exact figures for the amounts involved.

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