

National Police Secure Northern Roads

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Central government now controls checkpoints connecting major cities in the north, replacing armed men controlled by local commanders.

In northern Afghanistan, the national highway police are now manning security checkpoints once operated by armed militias controlled by local commanders. The change has come as a big relief to those who regularly travel by road here.

For years, travellers not only had to pay out "fees" levied by the militias, but also faced the risk of being accosted and robbed - even beaten or killed - when they drove along the major highways between northern cities. But now uniformed members of Afghanistan's central police have replaced the militia gunmen, whom drivers referred to as "highway bandits".

Sarajuddin, driving a Toyota Corolla, said he has travelled the main road from Mazar-e-Sharif to Sheberghan for the last 13 years. He said motorists were regularly charged illegal "road taxes" during the day - and ambushed and robbed by night - at checkpoints run by gunmen.

"Those who controlled the checkpoints taxed passengers and drivers under pretexts such as 'chai puli' [tea money], 'jeb kharchi' [pocket money] and lunch costs, and if someone didn't pay, he would be beaten and robbed," said Sarajuddin.

"We didn't mind paying those taxes, but the most frightening thing was that the armed men who controlled the checkpoints by day became looters at night... and they would even kill someone if they didn't like him. For all those reasons, I haven't driven at night for the last few years.

For Sarajuddin, the deployment of national police meant that "last week I travelled safely with four passengers during the night".

Ghulam Rabani, a shopkeeper who also regularly travels on the Mazar to Sheberghan road, is also relieved at the new regime.

"We used to put our money in the engine or in other parts of the car, in order to hide it from the armed robbers of Temorak [village]," he told IWPR, adding that he also kept some cash handy for pay-offs.

The interior minister launched a programme establishing traffic checkpoints manned by the national police force in March. The first traffic police centre was established in Mazar-e-Sharif a month later, and by November, the force had taken control of all 10 checkpoints on the 120-kilometre Mazar-Sheberghan and the 150-kilometre Mazar-Samangan highways.

Lieutenant-Colonel Abdul Maroof, head of the traffic police department headquartered in Mazar, said the process of taking control of checkpoints across the north is almost complete.

"The checkpoints recently taken over by highway police used to be controlled by armed men and groups controlled by General [Abdul Rashid] Dostum, Hizb-e-Wahdat-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Islami," he told IWPR in an interview last month.

"We have not yet been able to gain control of all highways in the north, because checkpoints on the Sheberghan-Faryab highway haven't been handed over yet. General Dostum has promised us that those checkpoints will be handed over to us next month, and after that, we'll have total control of the highways in the north."

National police are expected to take over the checkpoints on the 180-kilometre stretch from Sheberghan to Faryab this week, Maroof said. He explained "police have been installed at these checkpoints with the assistance of Dostum and officials of Jamiat and Wahdat.

"Since we established a highway police base in Mazar, we haven't faced any problems, and all the factions and government organisations have assisted us," he said. "We only delayed taking over these checkpoints because of some technical and logistical problems."

Azizullah Kargar, Dostum's deputy in the Junbesh-e-Milli faction, told IWPR, "Because government organisations were not ready to control the highways, we had to be involved in maintaining security on these roads, but now that the highway police want to assign their forces to these checkpoints, we are prepared to help them."

Kargar denied that any soldiers affiliated with Junbesh ever collected illegal fees in the name of security. He also denied responsibility for highway robberies and assaults.

"I don't have any information - maybe they are irresponsible individuals or thieves who used to loot and trouble passengers, but it is a misunderstanding to think that checkpoint soldiers are involved in robberies," he said.

Rahim Gul, a truck driver who regularly travels the Mazar-Samangan highway told IWPR he is glad that the old "security" system is no longer in place.

"When we began our trip from Samangan, we had to pay money to four or five posts affiliated with warlords, who were sitting there just to collect money," he said, adding that he was forced to pay between 50 and 200 afghanis, or between one and four US dollars, to the gunmen at each post.

"In addition to paying our taxes to the department of transport we had to pay to [security] posts as well," he complained. There have always been legitimate toll points where the transport ministry collects fees for highway maintenance.

After paying all the bribes, Rahim Gul said, "I would sometimes find when I got home, I hadn't made any profit".

"Thank God I have been saved from those who used to take money, and now - apart from paying legal taxes to the department of transport - I'm not paying anything to anybody," he said.

While stationing police on most northern highways may have solved people's problems on those main routes, travellers still face threats and violence on secondary and remote roads.

Sulaiman, from the Sang Charak district of Sar-e-Pul province, told IWPR that the number of robberies has

increased on the road to his district, with two or three cars looted every day.

"Last week I was riding to Mazar and the car I was travelling in was ambushed by looters, he said. "They took the 50,000 afghanis I was carrying."

Fazluddin, from the Aq Kuprik district of Balkh province, said looters attacked a car he was travelling in November. He said gunmen ordered the car to stop, but the passengers urged the driver to run the checkpoint. "The robbers shot out the car's tyres," he said. "Then they killed the driver... and beat and robbed the passengers."

Road travel for the hundreds of thousands of residents of Zare, Sholgara, Qarqin and Keshende districts of Balkh province also remains risky.

Maroof said that the traffic police are only responsible for securing the highways, not remote and secondary roads.

General Khalil Ziayee, head of security for Balkh province, told IWPR that he does not have enough police to secure all the remote and secondary roads. But he added that, "with assistance from the national army, we'll soon get rid of these problems".

General Taj Mohammad, head of the Shahin Army Corps based in Mazar-e-Sharif, told IWPR, "We'd like to secure all remote roads, where people still have problems, but we haven't received any orders from the ministry of defence yet."

If the military does begin providing security on secondary roads in the region, it will be its first visible achievement since the Shahin corps was established in Mazar in September, creating the new Afghan National Army's only base in the north.

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