

Right is Wrong for Afghan Drivers

Author: [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Police say all steering wheels must be on the left side, but the company hired to do the job has run into trouble with officialdom.

One of the curious features of driving in Afghanistan is that some cars have their steering wheels on the left - like most countries where vehicles drive on the right side of the road - and others, probably the majority, have them on the right.

Because the drivers of right-hand drive cars cannot see far ahead and may swing out blindly into oncoming traffic, Afghan traffic police view them as a major cause of accidents and say they must disappear from the roads. Abdul Sami Nazar, head of traffic police in the capital Kabul, said these vehicles cause three or four accidents every day.

As long ago as September 2003, the traffic police office ordered all cars with right-hand steering to undergo conversion. At the time, Afghanistan's traffic chief, Abdul Shakoor Kherkhawa, said that 85 per cent of all traffic accidents were due to right-hand vehicles.

The traffic department set a deadline by April 2005 for the changeover to happen. It didn't.

Now the government has commissioned a company run by an Afghan Iranian entrepreneur to carry out the modifications - but the work is being held up by contractual disputes.

Colonel Mohammad Arif, acting head of the Afghan Traffic Department, told IWPR that the Shahin Technical Service company had already begun doing conversions under an agreement with the transport ministry.

"The company.... has started work. It is now changing the steering wheels of [Toyota] Super Custom vans and it will soon start on other vehicles," he said.

Colonel Arif said Shahin was providing a one-year guarantee on its work, "The company has guaranteed to us that the altered vehicles will not face technical problems. And if any problems do arise, it will offer compensation."

Jamshid Kuhan, the head of the Shahin firm, said it had a monopoly on the conversion work and planned to change steering wheels over on more than 200,000 vehicles across the country within two years.

More than 50 per cent of the estimated half a million vehicles on the road are right-hand drive. Those imported from Dubai's huge wholesale markets are the correct left-hand drive type, while others that come via Pakistan from Japan are right-hand drive.

Kuhan said he had 20 years of experience in Iran behind him, and has invested five million US dollars in the Afghan business, hiring 80 staff in Kabul including two Iranian engineers. In the next two months, Shahin plans to open branches in the major provincial cities - Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad, hiring

a total of 400 personnel.

The conversion task will be made somewhat easier since Afghanistan's car pool is remarkably homogeneous - a huge majority of recently made saloon cars are Toyota Corollas, and the minivans used as buses and private transport are generally Toyotas as well.

"At the moment, we're only converting Super Custom vans, but we'll start doing other vehicles as soon as we open branches in the other four cities," said Kuhan, adding that the job takes five hours and costs the owner between 600 and 3,000 dollars.

But he is unhappy with the progress his company has made in securing its contract, saying the transport ministry has continually placed obstacles in their way.

After taking two years to grant an operating license to Shahin, he said, "the transport ministry set us a series of conditions, all of which we accepted. They sent one of their representatives who was supposed to be in attendance while we changed the steering wheels. Now they have recalled him, and unless he's present, we're unable to do our work".

Afghanistan's transport ministry says it is concerned that the Shahin firm has met the required safety standards by getting a Toyota franchise to modify vehicles made by the firm.

Mohammad Ramazan Shafaq, head of planning at the ministry, insisted there was no contract in place, and said the company would not be allowed to work until it got a licence from Toyota in Japan.

"The transport ministry has not signed any agreement with this company. Their work has not been acceptable to us from the very beginning. We have always stressed that they must get a licence from a reputable company," he said.

"We are concerned about people's lives. If these converted vehicles don't have accidents driving along straight roads, they will definitely have accidents in other places.... We can't have confidence in the guarantee provided by this company because it isn't licensed."

On the streets of Kabul, drivers spoke of the mechanical risks of a poorly-done conversion, citing examples of accidents caused by botched jobs done abroad.

Habibullah, 52, said his van was modified in Dubai and he drove very carefully for fear of mechanical problems, "I can't go over 80 kilometres an hour because the steering wheel locks sometimes. I'm very afraid of having an accident."

Ahmad Fayaz, 23, said a friend of his was driving through over the Salang mountain pass north of the capital when his car's steering wheel - also converted in Dubai - locked up on him. He managed to bring the car safely to a halt, but he and his passengers could easily have been killed.

Fayaz said that in light of his friend's near miss, he will never get his own right-hand drive Corolla changed

over, “I don't want to spend that amount of money on my car and put my life at risk.”

Kuhan, who says he has imported the correct conversion kits from Taiwan and Japan and insists the work will be fully guaranteed against mishaps, now plans to take his case to President Hamed Karzai.

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