

Trouble on All Fronts in Helmand

Author: [IWPR trainees](#)

The Taliban may not be the only, or even the worst, problem Helmand is facing. Corrupt police have been implicated in a wave of lawlessness in Helmand, which is fueling support for the Taliban - who, growing numbers of local residents believe, would restore order to the region.

The Helmand authorities last weekend arrested 35 highway police who have been charged with armed robbery. The group had allegedly been extorting money from motorists on the road from Lashkar Gah to Kandahar.

“We were taking money from vehicles,” one of the accused told IWPR, on condition of anonymity. “We took between 10 and 30 afghani per car (20 to 60 US cents) and more from trucks - up to 1,000 afghani (about 20 dollars). We had permission from our commanders. We collected the money, then gave it to our commanders, who divided it up.”

Mohammad Ismail, deputy of the police crime squad, told IWPR that the commanders had not yet been apprehended.

“These thieves were selling fuel from tankers to a private petrol station,” he told IWPR. “When we heard about this we went to arrest all of them. But the commanders... escaped.”

“We want to get rid of these traitors,” said Helmand’s governor, Assadullah Wafa, speaking to journalists in the capital, Lashkar Gah. “We are trying to make good security for the people.”

It is going to be an uphill battle. Helmand, which for the past year has witnessed major battles between foreign forces and insurgents, is in danger of descending into anarchy.

For the past month, residents have been complaining about the deteriorating security situation. Each day seems to bring a fresh wave of terror: kidnappings, bombings, robbery. While the insurgency drives much of the unrest, Helmandis are not ready to lay the bulk of the blame at the feet of the Taliban.

In fact, given the fact that many of the worst offenders may be wearing state uniforms, the wave of lawlessness is fueling support for the Taliban, which residents hope will bring order out of chaos.

“I will be very happy if the Taliban come back,” said Khudaidad, a student in Lashkar Gah. “The security is very bad. I am going to school here in town and things are getting worse every day. I am afraid that I will be kidnapped, or someone will try and steal my motorbike. If the Taliban come back everyone can have his own property. People will support the Taliban if things keep going like this.”

Khudaidad’s fears are far from groundless. In early June, a young man was murdered in the Safyan neighbourhood of Lashkar Gah, allegedly by thieves who were trying to steal his motorbike, a common form of transportation in Lashkar Gah’s narrow streets.

The victim, 22-year-old Esanullah, was shot on his way home, at about 8:30 in the evening.

“He was only 500 metres from home, and two men tried to steal his bike,” said his uncle, Hajji Bismillah. “They shot him six times, and when people gathered around, they ran away.”

According to Hajji Bismillah, the government was doing little to try and find those responsible.

“The Taleban did not kill my nephew,” he said. “I am 100 per cent sure he was killed by criminals.”

For many Helmand residents, the word “criminal” is closely associated with government authorities. Like the police arrested in July, many uniformed officials have been accused of engaging in robbery or other actions directed against the population.

“All the insecurity comes from the government,” said one resident of Safyan neighbourhood, who did not want to be named. “They steal from us during the night and during the day they wear a uniform.”

Sayed Shah, brother of a prominent female doctor in Lashkar Gah, was attacked in early June as well. Eyewitnesses say that four men tried to force him into a car, but he resisted. They stabbed him several times with a knife, then ran away. Sayed Shah was treated in hospital and later released.

At least one of the attackers was wearing a police uniform, said a local shopkeeper who did not want his named to be used.

Two young men, Allah Nazar and Mansoor, were also kidnapped in early June. A note was delivered to Allah Nazar’s father, saying that the boys “had received God’s judgment”.

The bodies have not been recovered, and family members have not given up hope that the pair are, in fact, alive. Many presume that the pair were taken by the Taleban and executed for their links with foreign forces. The note referred to Mansoor as “a spy”, which for Taleban is a capital offense. Others, however, remain convinced that ordinary criminals were behind the act.

Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Mayo, spokesman for the British forces in Helmand, told IWPR that he had no information about the kidnapped pair. But in general, he added, things were not too bad.

“I think that the security situation over the past month has been good,” he told IWPR. “But the police and the ANA (Afghan national Army) need people’s help.”

Mohammad Essaa Iftekhari, recently replaced as security chief in Helmand, offered this assessment, “The security situation is worsened because of a number of factors, including a poor economy, bad cultural situation, and lack of cooperation between the people and the government. But the main reason is that the organs of government do not cooperate with each other. The people are living in a conflict environment.”

Iftekhari accepted that the situation had become appreciably worse in the past few weeks, and acknowledged that some police were involved. "There are problems in the police and some policemen are behind the crimes that we see," he said. "There are some people who wear police uniforms and are involved in terrorist activities. They are not trained and not professional. They just got their jobs through influence."

But, he added, poppy, drug smuggling, and illiteracy are the major factors of insecurity, "Most of the crimes are committed by drug smugglers who cooperate with the Taleban," he said. "They are the enemies of Afghanistan and do not want the security situation to get better, so they are making things worse."

Helmand Province is the world centre of poppy cultivation, accounting for almost half of the international supply of opium. Most observers blame the rising insecurity on drug trafficking, and the link between smugglers and the Taleban, who are likely to be filling their war chests with drug profits.

The Taleban, in turn, blames the foreign forces and those who cooperate with them for the growing problems.

"The enemies of Afghanistan are clear," said one rebel commander in Nadali district, close to the capital. "They are foreigners, the ANA, the police, and other friends and allies of the government."

"When these foreigners come to our soil, crimes, killing, everything increases," he said. "The thieves and the criminals are within the government. And if they arrest anyone, they let him go the next day, because they take bribes."

The Taleban, he added, were directing their activities at these people, "We have no wish to harm our fellow countrymen. We have punished many criminals. We have attacked police and planted roadside bombs. The government knows who is a Taleban and who is not. But they cannot do anything to us. They just bother civilians and take their money. They are too weak."

ANA troops, backed by NATO, claim to have killed dozens of Taleban, including several prominent commanders, in the past few weeks. Unfortunately, they have also killed dozens of civilians, which makes the overall situation worse.

It is, however, true that the Taleban have inflicted heavy losses on the army and police in recent weeks. In mid-June a bus filled with police officers was blown up in Kabul, killing 35 and injuring dozens more. In Helmand, according to official sources, 40 police have been killed and 70 injured in the past two months alone.

The deterioration in Helmand has been rapid. In the past year, it has gone from relative stability to near chaos.

"One year ago there was good security in Nadali district," said Zabiullah. "No killings, no kidnappings, and the schools were open. But when the Taleban came the security worsened and people began to panic. They opened the door for every criminal. Now schools are closed, stealing is up, and people don't know what to do."

“I cannot leave the town centre,” said Wahidullah, who was studying English in Lashkar Gah until threats forced him to quit. “I am so scared. There are murders, thefts. I thought that someone would kill me if I continued to study, so I left.”

Abdul Karim, a student who had come to Lashkar Gah from northern Washir, a district under the control of the Taleban, was equally pessimistic.

“When they burned down the schools in Washir I came here to study,” he told IWPR. “I rented a room and made a small shop to pay for my expenses. And I started English classes. But then I was threatened by the Taleban. I had to quit, even though it was only one month until graduation. My father tells me he will sell poppy so that I can go and study in Pakistan. The authorities cannot make security here. They do not do their job. They commit crimes themselves. And even if they catch a criminal they let him go in one day.”

Girls and women have been particularly affected by the situation. In Helmand, where cultural traditions keep women largely bound to the home, the worsening security has meant the loss of what little freedom they had gained.

“My family returned to Lashkar Gah from Pakistan about one year ago,” said young Nooria. “The security situation was very good, and we lived peacefully. I am in the fifth grade. But now my father does not let me go to school. He says the situation is not good. And the little children in our family cannot even go outside to play.”

Parwana is made of sterner stuff. “I am in the ninth grade,” she said. “Our school is very far from the house, and my brother has to walk me to the door of the school. People threaten us and tell us they will kill us. The security used to be good in Lashkar Gah, but now if we leave the house people come and steal our things. I will study anyway, even if they threaten me 1,000 times. I will keep going to school.”

IWPR is conducting a journalism training and reporting project in Helmand Province. This article is a compilation of participants’ reports.

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