

The Washington Post

In Afghanistan, anti-corruption fight goes local

Advertisement

By Ernesto Londono
Monday, October 18, 2010; A13

JALALABAD, AFGHANISTAN - Khalis Shinwari doesn't have arrest powers, lacks an official mandate and works unarmed.

But the volunteer inspector, assigned by local elders to identify cases of graft and shoddy craftsmanship on development projects, might represent the best hope of stamping out corruption in a country where it has become all but institutionalized.

Stung by a series of setbacks in their efforts to fight corruption in Afghanistan, U.S. officials have begun putting more stock in grass-roots approaches.

While graft in top political circles has long angered Afghans, many say routine corruption such as bribery and malfeasance by local officials does even more to discredit this country's Western-backed government. Corruption and poor governance in many Afghan provinces are helping the Taliban and other insurgent groups gain ground across the country.

Residents in this eastern city point to a legion of examples: shoddily built schoolhouses where walls have begun to crumble and students are now taught outside; a new hospital where the doors are too narrow to accommodate beds; and a would-be irrigation system that is now a miles-long stretch of caked mud.

"The people are tired of this," Shinwari, 26, said on a recent morning as he inspected a three-story school building under construction - a rare example of a project on track and on schedule. "The people are angry. But to whom can they complain?"

U.S. officials here have come to see corruption as one of the chief obstacles to legitimizing and expanding the reach of the Afghan government.

So far, however, U.S. anti-corruption efforts in Afghanistan have led to more setbacks than successes, leading some Afghan and U.S. officials to argue that the United States should focus on a bottom-up approach instead of trying to reform from above.

The local inspectors model is a rare success story. Integrity Watch Afghanistan, a nongovernmental organization, began creating the watchdog groups in 2008. The concept was simple. Village elders were asked to assign trusted residents to act as monitors for development projects, many funded by international donors. The Kabul-based organization trained the monitors but does not pay them a salary. The assignments made the monitors - and the local councils that appointed them - direct stakeholders in the outcome of projects.

"Corruption is so widespread and common in Afghanistan that, unless you include the population in the battle against it, you will not win," said Karolina Olofsson, head of advocacy and communications for Integrity Watch Afghanistan, which receives funding from the government of Norway.

The strategy

When monitors spot cases of fraud or faulty construction, they bring it to the attention of local councils and supervisors at Integrity Watch. Their involvement with projects has made graft and corner-cutting rare, Integrity Watch officials say, because builders and contractors do not want to be publicly humiliated.

The group has trained monitors in 45 cities and villages, boosting oversight on more than 55 projects. Although that represents a tiny fraction of the billions of dollars in development aid that is being poured into Afghanistan, it has had a profound effect on how communities see corruption and their role in fighting it.

"They now see themselves as being part of the solution rather than just victims of the problem," Olofsson said.

After visiting two schools under construction in Jalalabad, a team of Integrity Watch supervisors recently headed to the outskirts of the city to meet an angry group of elders. Malik Walayat Khan, 45, a tribal leader, said residents were furious over the state of an irrigation system that was supposed to bring water to fields from the Kunar River.

The canal system, which residents said was built with \$160,000 from the Japanese government, was built too high above the water. Khan said the companies that received the contract probably skimmed funds and did a poor job.

"You can see the theft," he said, standing on the riverbed. "But can I punish them? No."

Fellow village elder Noor Rahman, 58, said the graft Afghans have been exposed to since the Taliban regime was toppled in late 2001 has made some long for the swift justice meted out by the fundamentalist Islamic movement.

"During the Taliban years, there was a thief in my village," he said. "The Taliban chopped his hand off in public and dangled it in the air for all to see."

Rahman said he doesn't want the movement to return to power, but he said many Afghans have begun to miss how the Taliban handled crime and punishment.

"That system was better," he said. "This government is not a good system."

U.S. focus

In his Aug. 1 counterinsurgency guidance to troops, the top NATO commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David H. Petraeus, instructed them to "identify corrupt local officials."

"Make sure the people we work with work for the people," he wrote. "If not . . . we will appear to be part of the problem."

But the American efforts to curb corruption have largely focused on the top ranks of President Hamid Karzai's administration, which recently blocked a U.S. Justice Department-backed team in the Afghan attorney general's office after probes began to target senior government officials.

Simultaneously, U.S. military officials overhauled their contracting guidelines this summer after congressional investigators found that millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars were being siphoned by a complex web of power brokers that included insurgent groups.

Corruption in Afghanistan has become a big concern on Capitol Hill. Lawmakers recently blocked

nonessential funding for Afghanistan initiatives, citing concern over the potential for misuse of U.S. tax dollars.

In recent weeks, U.S. officials have recalibrated their stance on fighting corruption. In the face of Karzai's opposition, they backed down on their bid to help the Afghan attorney general's office prosecute a senior presidential aide and have begun exploring local alternatives.

Increasingly, Olofsson said, U.S. civilian and military officials have sought guidance from Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

Shortly after taking command this summer, Petraeus appointed Brig. Gen. H.R. McMaster to oversee a task force created to fight corruption. U.S. military officials say McMaster, who earned a reputation for unorthodox thinking in Iraq, is coming up with a new strategy. He has maintained a low profile since arriving in Kabul in the summer. Through a spokesman, the general declined to be interviewed.

The Afghan government has embarked on initiatives billed as anti-corruption measures, including creating an office empowered to review complaints. So far, no senior government officials have been held publicly accountable for corruption.

The government's poor record on this front is one of the main obstacles in Karzai's bid to get insurgents to reconcile and join the political process, said Sayed Sharif Yousofy, the manager and spokesman of the country's reconciliation office.

"We are corrupt from head to toe," he said in a recent interview. "It's like a cancer. I don't know why the government won't appoint honest people."

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

Sponsored Links

Castrol Community Site

Your Source for Care Care Tips, Car Maintenance & Advice.
CastrolCrew.com

Mortgage Rate Drops to 3.6% FIXED!

\$200,000 loan for \$708/month. Free Quotes - No SSN Rqd. Save \$1000s!
Mortgage.RefinanceFrontier.com

The Top 10 Golf Mistakes?

Play Best Golf of Your Life in Just 2 weeks - 10 Free Video Lessons
PeakPerformanceGolfSwing.com

Buy a link here

© 2010 The Washington Post Company