

4. *Unaccountable Supply Chain Security Contractors Fuel Corruption*

Finding: HNT contractors and their private security providers report widespread corruption by Afghan officials and frequent government extortion along the road. The largest private security provider for HNT trucks complained that it had to pay \$1,000 to \$10,000 in monthly bribes to nearly every Afghan governor, police chief, and local military unit whose territory the company passed. HNT contractors themselves reported similar corruption at a smaller scale, including significant numbers of ANP checkpoints. Military officials confirmed that they were aware of these problems.

Rashid Popal, the president of Watan Risk Management, raised his voice: “Why don’t you ask me who I *do* pay?” After a number of questions regarding allegations of payments to the Taliban, Mr. Popal was eager to describe the real threat: “It is the *government* I am paying all along the way.”¹⁶² From Mr. Popal’s perspective, the government, not the Taliban, “is the biggest threat to convoy security.” Commander Ruhullah agreed. “Every government official is the enemy of these convoys,” he declared.¹⁶³

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– Commander Ruhullah

According to Commander Ruhullah and Watan Risk Management, bribes paid by drivers and security providers at Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) checkpoints represent only the tip of a pyramid of government corruption that feeds off of the U.S. supply chain. Rashid Popal quickly volunteered a list of government offices that his company must bribe in order to successfully escort HNT convoys along Highway 1, including governors, provincial police chiefs, district police chiefs, and local commanders for the National Directorate of Security, in addition to the local ANA and ANP units. Many of the bribes are paid monthly and range from \$1,000 to \$10,000.¹⁶⁴

If the warlords and security companies are so powerful, why pay? According to the Popals, security companies view these bribes as “nuisance payments” because local government officials can make operations difficult for them. The government’s ability to “deregister” private security contractors is of particular concern, which gives officials who control the licensing process significant power. Officials not able to leverage their authority on the licensing process simply impose “new laws and regulations on a daily basis.” This is standard procedure according to Commander Ruhullah, who said that police chiefs and governors did their best to structure

laws in a way that enabled them to extort the convoys that passed through their areas of jurisdiction.¹⁶⁵ Commander Ruhullah gave an example: a new requirement in one area that all convoys wait until 10:00 p.m. to depart, forcing the convoys to travel during the more dangerous nighttime and giving local officials a full day to extort bribes. Another common practice of police harassment, he said, is to stop convoys and check every single guard's weapon for proper registration papers.¹⁶⁶

Other government interventions cited by Watan Risk Management were more sinister. Rashid Popal claimed that a member of the Afghan Parliament had attempted to enlist Haji Musah, a "legendary fighter" and member of Hizb-I Islami Gulbuddin, an Islamist political and military group, in an attempt to muscle Commander Ruhullah and Watan Risk Management out of the convoy security business in one province.¹⁶⁷

Rashid Popal stated that he had once asked a provincial governor why he forced Watan Risk Management to pay bribes even though the company had helped to improve the security of his province. According to Mr. Popal, the governor explained quite simply that he was forced to extort money from the private security companies in order to pay back what he had paid for his position. The same rules apply to police chiefs and other government officials who pay a set price to the provincial government in order to obtain their positions, said Mr. Popal.¹⁶⁸

Other security and trucking contractors portrayed a more cooperative, albeit still corrupt, relationship between security companies and the ANA/ANP. One HNT contractor stated that Commander Ruhullah pays local ANA commanders as much as \$300,000 per month to supplement Watan's security forces.¹⁶⁹ A security company executive concurred, stating that Commander Ruhullah "operates with corrupt members of ANP and ANA to achieve his desired outcomes," which often includes attacking or directly disrupting the operations of other security companies.¹⁷⁰ Commander Ruhullah flatly denied employing active ANA/ANP officers to work on his convoys, saying that he was only forced to pay bribes.¹⁷¹

Many of the HNT contractors also acknowledged that trucking convoys were forced to pay bribes to all manner of government officials at various stages along the road. The CEO of one HNT contractor said that his drivers are frequent targets of ANA and ANP extortion because they carry emergency cash reserves for breakdowns. He said that he issued specific orders to truck drivers not to pay bribes to the ANA and ANP and that his trucks had been impounded as a result, requiring him to go out personally by helicopter to free his drivers. The ANA and ANP know that the drivers carry between \$400 and \$1,000, he said, but in a cash-based society the drivers have no other option to pay for food, fuel, tires, and cranes in case of an accident. In Afghanistan, "every driver ... must be self-sufficient on the road." As a result, many of his drivers pay the bribes out of fear.¹⁷²

Another HNT contractor's country manager said that he had heard of "bribery and extortion by government officials," such as "checkpoints by ANP that request money" from drivers, but said that his drivers rarely speak about the payoffs and each believes that his "life is in danger if he reveals information."¹⁷³

Military officials with oversight of the HNT contract were also aware of widespread allegations of official Afghan government corruption. Lieutenant Colonel Lewis, the HNT manager for the 143rd Expeditionary Sustainment Command, stated that he had heard significant reports regarding alleged bribes to the ANA outside of Kandahar Airfield. He took an armored vehicle and went to observe for himself, but he could tell that the ANA acted differently with him around.¹⁷⁴

Lieutenant Colonel Elwell, the commander of the 484th Movement Control Battalion that directly managed the HNT contract, also reported that he was aware of unauthorized police checkpoints outside of Kandahar Airfield. Lieutenant Colonel Elwell stated that he had wanted to investigate official corruption further but it was difficult because the checkpoints moved frequently.¹⁷⁵