

2. *The Highway Warlords Run a Protection Racket*

Finding: The HNT contractors and their trucking subcontractors pay tens of millions of dollars annually to local warlords across Afghanistan in exchange for “protection” for HNT supply convoys to support U.S. troops. Although the warlords do provide guards and coordinate security, the contractors have little choice but to use them in what amounts to a vast protection racket. The consequences are clear: trucking companies that pay the highway warlords for security are provided protection; trucking companies that do not pay believe they are more likely to find themselves under attack. As a result, almost everyone pays. In interviews and documents, the HNT contractors frequently referred to such payments as “extortion,” “bribes,” “special security,” and/or “protection payments.”

Rashid Popal, the President of Watan Risk Management, praised Matiullah Khan lavishly. “Matiullah is a genius. Without him, Tarin Kowt [the capital of Uruzgan] would fall [to the Taliban].” According to Mr. Popal, Matiullah provides effective security and jobs for his province. He can do this because any contractor working there “must hire subcontractors and workers” from his province. Everyone, including Mr. Popal, must pay for Matiullah’s security services to travel up the road from Kandahar to Tarin Kowt. There are no exceptions: “[n]o one leaves without paying... Matiullah will kill anyone on his highway, Taliban or not.” A driver interviewed by the *New York Times* echoed that assessment: “It’s suicide to come up this road without Matiullah’s men.”¹¹³

Along Highway 1, between Kabul and Kandahar, HNT contractors report that Commander Ruhullah runs a similar, but less effective, protection racket. To most trucking contractors, Commander Ruhullah “controls” Highway 1. According to the former country manager of one HNT company that contracted with Watan, “you had to pay Ruhullah to either provide security or let [us] go through his territory.” Commander Ruhullah held his company “hostage;” if he did not pay, he believed his trucks would be “shot up.”¹¹⁴

While a small handful of security companies apparently do operate convoy security missions on Highway 1 without paying Commander Ruhullah, they do so at their peril.

While a small handful of security companies apparently do operate convoy security missions on this route without paying Commander Ruhullah, they do so at their peril. These companies report regular intimidation, “contact,” and “surprises” that they attribute to Commander

Ruhullah. While there is no comprehensive incident data to compare how each security company fares on Highway 1, there is widespread agreement among HNT contractors that those who do not use Commander Ruhullah face significantly greater risk.¹¹⁵

An executive from one private security company that travels Highway 1 without paying Commander Ruhullah said that U.S. supply convoys guarded by his company had come under attack by Commander Ruhullah's men on multiple occasions. "[He] was trying to scare us into not participating on his route, attacking our resolve to continue to service the route." He continued, "[Commander Ruhullah] operates with relative impunity from Ghazni to Kandahar, and even into Helmand Province... He is willing to ruthlessly exploit the lack of military control along the routes on which he operates."¹¹⁶



Photo Credit: Subcommittee Staff

In an incident report from the summer of 2008, the security company reported hostile contact with 15-20 insurgents. According to the report:


[The convoy security commander] came to the conclusion that this ambush... was well planned by Rohollah due to the following reason: When [the convoy security commander's] guards were moving with [the Ministry of Defense] convoy and Rohollah's guards, they were moving together till after Baghi Poul, when the convoy was at Howz-e-mdad, the rohollah's surfs [trucks] was in front of convoy and not with [the convoy security commander's] guards, they

scattered themselves from [the convoy security commander’s] guards. Close to Keskenadkhod, the surfs of Rohollah were in front of convoy, minutes before the ambush the guards of [the convoy security commander] could see that the guards of Rohollah were busy on their phones and now know that they were talking with the insurgents. Just before the ambush, 2 x Surfs (one of these Surfs as a black surf, the guards recognized this surf as the QRF for Rohollah’s Ass commander) and 2 X Corolla’s, **these vehicles came from the village and waited for Rohollah’s surfs to pass before they started engaging with the weapons onto the guards of [the convoy security commander], that guards of Rohollah never returned fire onto the insurgents.**¹¹⁷


An HNT trucking contractor reported similar results. The company used Watan Risk Management with few major incidents in thousands of truck missions. On the handful of occasions that the company attempted to provide its own security on Highway 1, a senior executive reported that they “got shot up” and suspected Commander Ruhullah’s fingerprints on the attack. For that company, the lesson was plain: “if we use Watan it works, if we use [our own] security it doesn’t.”¹¹⁸

Documents and Correspondence Reflect a Vast Extortion Racket


In a PowerPoint presentation dated May 9, 2009 (several days after performance of the HNT contract began), the country manager for one HNT prime contractor reported that his company was having trouble transporting goods to a U.S. forward operating base in Sharana, Paktika Province (key slide excerpted below):¹¹⁹



CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION



- In the Sharana Region the local power (warlord) controls who is able to access the bases to fulfil missions.
- In order for HNT contractors to be able to work in Sharana an access tariff to this “organization” must be paid.
- The current fee is \$150,000.00 USB MONTHLY



When the military logisticians asked the prime contractors why they would not support missions to certain particularly insecure locations, the contractors vented about the high cost of “special security,” and “protection payments.” In a white paper submitted to the military in the Summer of 2009, one contractor complained about the high cost of security.¹²⁰

White Paper, [REDACTED] Dwyer Concerns/Leatherneck OP Area

Security Costs

Without being personally involved in the bidding on this contract I can confidently state that many of the costs of the increased volume focused in areas with difficult security situations was not factored in. The need to provide heavy weapons and robust security with ex pat leader leadership was not a requirement on the contract and now seems to be a requirement in some areas unless these missions are turned over to green security. I also believe that most involved in this contract knew that cash money is often the most effective security, but I do not think it was anticipated how high the market would drive these prices and that cash security and special security forces would so often be the only option:

RC South has been the location of nearly all of the attacks on IDIQ carriers, which needless to say presents significant challenges as it relates to controlling the quality of work and production from the LN drivers and security staff. The utilization of “Green Security” will eliminate the extortion in the south; however the attacks on convoys will increase due to this fact. Some carriers are paying as much as 15,000 dollars per truck for missions going to Dwyer and other south FOB, s. Green Security on these trips will be more cost effective, safer, and more efficient.

In response to the same Department of Defense request for information on security and costs on certain routes, another HNT project manager responded:

The cost of security for these vehicles is very high and absorbs most of any profit we would make. Sub Contractors and drivers request more money to operate in this area, further adding to the problems for our companies... The cost of Private Security is exceptionally high, with companies attempting to raise their prices continually. **It is believed that a part of these charges are being paid as bribes to local Commanders, and therefore inevitably to the enemy...** As previously stated this is one of the most volatile regions of the country. There is a continuous threat of roadside IED, and ambush. **There will also be a threat, not only from enemy forces but from local commanders who have not been paid their tax.**¹²¹

In an e-mail dated May 4, 2009 (within days of the beginning of the HNT contract), one HNT project manager wrote to his colleague: “the more dangerous the missions, entering areas where the Taliban controls, the more corruption we will have to deal with which for example requires an additional fee to get your trucks through without getting hit.”¹²²

In an e-mail dated June 9, 2009 between senior managers of the same contractor, the project manager wrote:

I had a conversation with [the CEO of their trucking subcontractor] when I was devising the attached OP's plan and he became extremely offensive when I started asking him some very hard questions. Per a conversation he and I had last week we had 80 security vehicles so as you can see the plan is based on this number. When we got down to allocating vehicles per region per the plan he stated that we may not have 80 vehicles all the time. (what ever the F%\$#! that means) **He then stated that the money that is allocated for the vehicles is sometimes utilized to pay the "Special Security" in the south and southwest so naturally I asked if we are using that money to pay them then why the F^%\$#@ are we being charged 14,500 per truck going to the same areas, are we paying them twice????????????!!!!!!!!!!!!**¹²³

The contractor subsequently submitted a "request for equitable adjustment" to the Department of Defense to raise its contract price to account for the increased costs of "special security." The Department denied the request.