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Open Season for Kabul Police

Afghan police have attributed a substantial drop in the crime rate in the capital Kabul to a recent authorisation to open fire on suspected criminals.

Colonel Mohammad Zaher, head of criminal investigations for Kabul province, said the number of recorded serious crimes fell by 17 per cent to 546 in the last quarter of 2010 compared with the previous three months.

"Six months ago, there were two kidnappings in Kabul every day, but only four cases have occurred in the last four months, and the perpetrators have been arrested," Mohammad Zaher said.

He attributed the improvement to a combination of enhanced intelligence gathering, better recruitment and training, and an anti-corruption drive in which around 20 police officers were suspended for alleged association with criminals or insurgents.

Another major change, the colonel said, was an order issued two months ago by Interior Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi permitting police to open fire on suspected criminals if they attempted to escape.

Interior ministry spokesman Zmarai Bashari noted that the recruitment of female officers – while still very limited because of traditional attitudes to women doing this kind of work – had already made a difference to crime detection.

"When the number of female police officers increased, it contributed to falling crime. Previously, male police officers were unable to search women carrying weapons and drugs, or female members during a house search," he said.

It is not known how many suspects have been shot since minister Mohammadi sanctioned the policy, but the tactic has proved controversial.

"No international law grants permission to open fire unless the criminal poses an immediate life-threatening risk," social scientist Jawid Kohestani said, adding that the net effect was likely to be a higher, not lower level of violence.

"The interior minister can in no way be above the law," he said. "Even if the president were to issue an order to opening fire, he would be acting in contravention of the constitution, and the order would not be enforceable."

Abdul Wadud Ferozi of Afghanistan's Institute for Law and Political Sciences said the presumption of innocence was paramount.

"Unless it is proven that a suspect has committed some act, he cannot be punished," Ferozi said. "Only if citizens' safety is threatened in such a way that there is no option but to kill the suspect is it permissible to open fire."

Kohestani said that while the number of kidnappings might have fallen in Kabul, he was unconvinced that overall crime levels had fallen, especially outside the capital.

"There's been no reduction in crimes in the provinces. The roads are not safe. Violence against women, sexual abuse of children and the increasing number of drug addicts are all symptoms of organised crime, and the police have failed to curb them."

Political scientist Ahmad Sayedi agreed, saying, "The security forces are trying to shift public opinion to suggest that crime has fallen, while robberies, kidnappings, murders, abuse and other crimes are happening in many provinces."

The international community has prioritised assistance for the Afghan National Police, and around 30 countries have been involved in providing training and equipment to the 122,000-strong force.

However, public confidence in the ANP remains low. An opinion survey commissioned by the United Nations in 2010 and published last month revealed a widespread lack of trust in the police. Some 60 per cent of the 5,000 people polled across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan reported significant levels of corruption among police officers, and about half said they would not report a crime to them.

"People lost trust in the police from the very beginning," Kohestani said. "It's going to take a lot of time before people begin trusting and cooperating with the police again. And the police will not be successful unless this happens."

Faisal, an economics student at Kabul University, said many ANP members were formerly part of the armed factions that fought one another in the 1992-96 civil war, and continued to bear old ethnic or factional grudges.

"Many policemen come from the 'jihadi' factions who were involved in the civil war," he said. "They have massacred people and looted their property. Many of them aren't even literate. So how can we claim that our police have been successfully reformed?"

Yet some Kabul residents say they have seen the improvements in police efficiency with their own eyes.

Hajji Abdul Jabar, a money-changer in the city's Saray-i Shahzadah neighbourhood, said armed men kidnapped four months previously and demanded a ransom of three million US dollars.

"Many of my friends told me not to inform the police, who might be colluding with the kidnappers," he recalled. "But when we told the police, they arrested the kidnappers within a few days and my nephew was released."

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