



## **Afghan drivers endure bad roads, bandits, corrupt police**

**By  
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It used to take Uncle Mir only three days to reach Kandahar in southern Afghanistan from the northern town of Hairatan. Now it takes him at least 20. Haji Hajat Mir provides logistical transport for the NATO-led coalition. He has been a driver for nearly two decades, and says he has never seen Afghan highways in worse condition.

Each day, he says he dodges potholes "big enough for a bull to fall into."

He drives through freezing temperatures over icy roads, and constantly struggles with police demanding bribes. Sometimes, he encounters bullets from roadside bandits.

"The trip from the north to the capital through the Salang Highway is tedious and long," he says. Drivers used to cross the Salang area on a windy mountain road in four or five hours. "But now, it takes two, and sometimes even three days," the 41-year-old driver says.

Salang encompasses a famous tunnel pass, built by the Russians in 1960s, through a mountain that connects the capital and the south to the north. It should have been 15-minute trip. But this time, it took him six hours to get out of the 10-kilometre tunnel, as poor road conditions and high traffic volumes caused congestion.

"I feel the worst when stuck inside the tunnel. All the engines keep running but there is not enough oxygen. Sometimes I feel like people will die because of the exhaust," Mir says. The tunnels don't have ventilation system, or lights. Mohammad Bashir, another truck driver, says he has gotten stuck on the other side of the Salang tunnel for three days, waiting for his turn to cross the mountain.

It has taken him a month to get to Kandahar from Hairatan, he says, adding that his "favourite country the Soviet Union" should come back to rebuild the tunnel. The road gets worse during the winter. "Roads are more slippery. There is the danger of avalanches. And if you are not careful, you can easily slip into a creek and crash," Uncle Mir says. In February 2010, more than 160 drivers and passengers were killed when avalanches buried dozens of vehicles along the highway.

Last year, after Pakistan stopped NATO trucks crossing its border on the east of Afghanistan, the military alliance decided to use the northern route, increasing the damage to the highway, drivers and officials say. "Everyone who travels through this way is close to death all the time," says General Mohammad Rajab, who is responsible for security and maintenance of the Salang Highway.

It is in need of immediate reconstruction, he says. "The air and ventilation system in the tunnel is designed for 2,000 vehicles for 24 hours. Believe me, 10,000 to 16,000 vehicles pass through the tunnel in a day," he says. "The roads are partially destroyed due to heavily loaded NATO supply trucks," which make up 90 percent of traffic, Rajab says.

Bad road conditions are not the only problem. Sayed Qattali, a young politician from the western province of Herat, says security and government officials often create problems for the convoys. "They give us a lot of trouble. They stop us every now and then and search our vehicles," he says. Qattali's family owns a logistics company that provides security for NATO fuel convoys.

"They want bribe money. It delays our journey and the company that we provide security for gets annoyed about the delay. We get into trouble both ways." Mir says drivers can end up spending 80 to 90 percent of what they earn out on the highway itself. "Even the government robs us legally. They take our money under different names, different receipts," he says. "Driving on this road is very difficult. We face robbers, gunmen, Taliban and police 24 hours a day. Everyone thinks about robbing us."

Mir showed a bullet hole in the left corner of his truck's windscreen. He was shot at by highway robbers a couple of months ago. Qattali says roadside bandits are getting more sophisticated with better weapons. More than 65 of his men have been killed in highway attacks by Taliban insurgents and armed robbers between 2008-11.

"They are more equipped these days. They stay to fight until they all die or they kill everyone and take everything," he says. "Their ambush tactic is very good, and use roadside bombs quite frequently." Sometimes, the armed robbers

wear Afghan security forces uniforms and launch attacks on the convoys, Qattali says. "A couple months ago, 23 people were killed in Bakwa district of Farah [province]. [The attackers] were wearing Afghan National Army dress and they stopped the security convoy, stripped them of their weapons and killed them all."

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