

\$15,000 A TRUCK PROTECTION PAYMENTS TO THE TALIBAN

✖ As we wait with bated breath to find out whether Obama or Stanley McChrystal wins this little war of big ego, some of the discussion has been focused on whether Obama can succeed in Afghanistan without McChrystal's leadership (particularly given the way he has gamed alliances with Karzai and the British).

But let's look at the other piece of Afghanistan news today which may have as much bearing on whether or not Obama can succeed in Afghanistan: the report that Afghan trucking contractors are paying big money payoffs to warlords—including Taliban leaders we're supposed to be fighting—for protection for their trucks.

Security for the U.S. Supply Chain Is Principally Provided by Warlords. The principal private security subcontractors on the HNT contract are warlords, strongmen, commanders, and militia leaders who compete with the Afghan central government for power and authority. Providing "protection" services for the U.S. supply chain empowers these warlords with money, legitimacy, and a *raison d'être* for their private armies. Although many of these warlords nominally operate under private security companies licensed by the Afghan Ministry of Interior, they thrive in a vacuum of government authority and their interests are in fundamental conflict with U.S. aims to build a strong Afghan government.

The Highway Warlords Run a Protection Racket. The HNT contractors and their trucking subcontractors in Afghanistan 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.”

Protection Payments for Safe Passage Are a Significant Potential Source of Funding for the Taliban. Within the HNT contractor community, many believe that the highway warlords who provide security in turn make protection payments to insurgents to coordinate safe passage. This belief is evidenced in numerous documents, incident reports, and e-mails that refer to attempts at Taliban extortion along the road. The Subcommittee staff has not uncovered any direct evidence of such payments and a number of witnesses, including Ahmed Wali Karzai, all adamantly deny that any convoy security commanders pay insurgents. According to experts and public reporting, however, the Taliban regularly extort rents from a variety of licit and illicit industries, and it is plausible that the Taliban would try to extort protection payments from the coalition supply chain that runs through territory in which they freely operate.

Contractors have been faced with using NATO forces for protection. Or paying increasing

rates in protection fees to warlords. And those rates are getting downright expensive.

The need to provide heavy weapons and robust security with ex pat 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 [ISAF 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 for the [local national] 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 per truck for missions going to Dwyer and other south FOBs.** [my emphasis]

Last week, Spencer wrote that DOD has a plan to fix this and other Afghan contracting issues.

It has an uncertain budget, a team of fewer than two dozen military officers and civilians, and barely a year to make its mark on counterinsurgency in Afghanistan before the U.S. begins its transfer of security responsibilities to Afghans. In that time, a new military task force will attempt to get a handle on one of the thorniest aspects of the way the U.S. military fights its wars: its relationship with the small army of contractors it hires for support.

[snip]

Task Force 2010 is led by Rear Adm. Kathleen Dussault, a longtime Navy logistics officer who served as senior contracting overseer when Petraeus commanded the U.S. war in Iraq. Dussault arrived in Kabul last week after meeting the week before with John Brummet, the head of audits for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, for a briefing on “forensic audits,” something Brummet described as a “data-mining effort to look at financial transaction data” for “various anomalies” indicating waste, fraud or abuse.

Which doesn’t sound all that promising.

So here’s how I figure it. The Afghan warlords have improved on our Soviet era ploy. Back then, we were paying warlords (and building up their power) to fight our enemy, the Russians.

But now, we’re paying them—up to \$15,000 a truck!—to not fight us, just so we can get necessary goods to our troops.

I can’t imagine what could go wrong with that.