

By Seda Muradyan

Anna cannot drive a car. Yet the 29-year-old from Yerevan has a driver's license stating she is able to drive not only passenger cars, but also trucks.

A driver's license in Armenia can be obtained in three months, one month or even in a week. It simply depends on the size of the bribe. A year ago, it took Anna three months to get her driver's license. It cost her 84,625 drams (US\$250).

"You need to find someone in a driving school who will trust you and agree to strike a deal with you," Anna said. "Then you agree the terms, pay the required amount of money and you don't have to worry about anything else, nor pass any exams. You'll get your driver's license in a short while."

A year has passed, but the procedure Anna described remains the same. What has changed, however, is the amount of the bribe: it has increased.

I decided to see myself how procuring a driver's license through bribery worked. I called "Vardan" (source's name has been changed), an instructor at one of Yerevan's driving schools who helped Anna get her license.

"If you don't want to attend classes at our school, then you need to bring two passport-size photographs, a copy of your passport, 25,000 drams (US\$74) and come to our school," Vardan said. "Three months later you'll need to pay another 55,000 drams (US\$162)."

In order to get the license in a week, Vardan was ready to settle the issue for 150,000 drams (US\$443). According to Vardan, the sum I paid would be distributed among all the parties involved in the process.

The police force is the driver's licensing body in Armenia. However, drivers' training is organized by private driving schools. This system was adopted back in Soviet times, when the schools were part of the State Traffic Inspection Agency.

Eduard Hovhanisian, director of the NGO Achilles Center for Drivers' Rights Protection said the "business" of obtaining driver's license through bribery thrives because of the dearth of relevant laws. The police organize exams to grant the licenses, but there is no established procedure for administering them.

The Armenian Law on Traffic Security has recommended the adoption of a new by-law. However, as long as no such regulations exist, the police are guided by the Order No.06 of the USSR Interior Minister of 1987.

The authorities claim that reforms are being implemented in the police system. On April 4, 2006, Armenian President Robert Kocharyan approved several measures aimed at tackling Armenian traffic issues.

More than 20 by-laws already have been passed, but experts say many gaps remain. In addition, even the properly developed laws are often not applied correctly, if they are applied at all. Experts blame the country's penchant for corruption, rooted in Soviet times, which expanded into independent Armenia. The non-transparent work of the police also plays a role.

"Corruption in the road traffic field is conditioned by lack of transparency ... there are numerous reasons ... the laws include discriminatory provisions, violations of human rights; this also provides the basis for corruption risks," Hovhanisian said. "The laws contain ambiguous or unclear definitions, which enable the inspectors to interpret the laws at their discretion, which results in the conflict of interests and corruption risks."

The head of the Traffic Police Department of Armenia, Police Colonel Ishkhan Ishkhanyan, said improvements in traffic regulations have been adopted by the government and will be put into practice shortly.

Ishkhanyan said that traffic reforms in Armenia are implemented in three stages: 1) the creation of the necessary legislative framework, 2) the hiring of staff and procurement of equipment and 3) the reduction of traffic accidents. He said the first stage of reforms will be completed soon, and the second stage has already begun.

However, ordinary citizens have yet to see the effects of these reforms.

During the first half of 2007, 792 traffic accidents were registered in Armenia, which resulted in 139 dead and 140 injured. Compared with the same period in 2006, the number of accidents during the first six months of 2007 has increased by 31 percent.

Experts say traffic accidents in Armenia have increased because driver's licenses are issued to people who know nothing about the simplest traffic rules.

Aram, 28, purchased a car recently. To obtain a driver's license, he approached go-between who promised to "settle" the issue for 10,115 drams (US\$300). Aram said if he refused to pay, they would not give him a "pass."

"I'd rather pay once, and my acquaintance will give the sum to the Traffic Inspection, so we'll handle it," Aram said.

Traffic violations in Armenia also have become rather expensive since March 24, 2007. Under the police reforms, there has been an attempt to punish traffic offenders through the introduction of huge penalties.

For instance, driving a car without license plates will cost you 100,000 drams (US\$295), disobeying a stop signal costs 200,000 drams (US\$591), and unfastened seat belt violations cost 5,000 drams (US\$15).

One hardly sees drivers with fastened seat belts in Yerevan, even on the highways. Those who do buckle their seatbelts attract immediate attention – for sure they are foreigners, not locals.

In order to save the traffic officers from bribery temptation, the government introduced a new reward mechanism. Bonuses are offered to police officers who register traffic violations. The corresponding fines, according to officials, are used for reforming the police system.

During the first six months of this year, the police collected 214,315,000 drams (US\$633,131) in fines; 70 percent went to purchase technical equipment, and 30 percent was allocated for bonus payments.

The Achilles Center did not receive any complaints from drivers about bribery during the first three months of the new reward program. The drivers said the inspectors refused to take bribes and instead filed reports about violations. Beginning in late May, however, officials from the Achilles Center said the number of complaints from drivers increased. They said the inspectors are again taking bribes and the amount has increased.

"The stakes went up," Arthur said. "If it used to be 1,000 drams (US\$3), now you can't always get away with 5,000 drams (US\$15)."

"They adopted the law, but it is applied selectively," Eduard Hovhanisian said.

For instance, high ranking officials, their children and relatives or people that have connections to officials do not experience serious problems with traffic police if they violate the law. One often sees cars exceeding the speed limit, even rushing past traffic police in the Yerevan streets. This is common practice among those who are positive their friends will “back” them and help settle their “problems.”

Larisa Alaverdyan, former ombudsman of Armenia, member of the opposition Heritage party and representative in the National Assembly, said that the police system and corruption are entwined.

“The police system is corrupt, a big channel of the most tough corruption; this is where everything, every illegality starts,” she said.

Armenian police officials do not share the opinion that the police system is highly corrupt. However, deputy chief of Police, Lieutenant General Hovanes Hunanyan, said “Armenian police leadership considers it as a matter of principle to punish the staff members who violate the law, including the constitutional rights of the citizens.”

In his words, during the first half of 2007, 55 officials of the Armenian Police (compared to 22 in the first half of 2006) faced disciplinary action and were fired for various violations. Six were charged criminally.

Pedestrians in Yerevan, however, still complain about the extremely disorderly traffic in the city. “Look, there is a police car driving past, but just look at that speeding SUV, no one dares to stop that monster,” said Karine, 55, pointing to a car rushing along the central Mashtots Avenue in Yerevan, breaking traffic rules along its way.

Anna has not used her driver’s license yet; she says the traffic in Yerevan is “abnormal.”

“I took 10 driving lessons, I was very enthusiastic, wanted to buy a car,” Anna said. “But, as soon as I got to learn the traffic rules, I understood how irregular the traffic is here... my wish to drive a car in this city totally vanished.”

Instructor Vardan said that a newbie driver in Armenia needs to learn traffic rules and undergo “special training” to get to know “Yerevan traffic rules.” For instance, he said, one needs to be aware of luxury car drivers. They can behave unexpectedly — like driving through red lights or on the wrong side of the street. Vardan said drivers of such

cars are the most frequent infringers, because their violations remain “unnoticed” by the traffic inspectors. All of these drivers are either high-ranking officials or are well-connected.

I envy Tbilisi, capital of the neighboring Georgia, when I see its traffic inspectors. Just a couple of years ago, the situation in Tbilisi was similar to that in Armenia. But now my Georgian colleagues speak of their “patrol” proudly; they know they cannot get away with a bribe if they violate traffic rules. If I suggest going out for a drink with my colleagues, those who drive always refuse my offer. No, they say, what if the patrol stops us?

The issue of seat belts is also strict in Tbilisi. My driver Misha always makes me fasten my seat belt on the highways. “They will fine both you and me,” Misha says.

The Georgian patrol officers do not take bribes; they’re very polite, ready to help the passers-by and the drivers. Georgians even joke — if you’re drunk or feeling bad, call the patrol and they will take you home.

Following Georgia’s example, Armenia is trying to implement reforms. Top police officials said they would keep struggling against the bribery in the system until this phenomenon is gone forever. However, the World Bank’s 2006 paper *Tackling Corruption in Transitional Economies* revealed that despite the fact that the government developed the Strategy for Tackling Corruption in 2003 and implemented an Anti-Corruption Council in 2004, there has been no significant reduction of corruption in the country.

The head of the Armenian branch of Transparency International, Amalia Kostanian, agreed. She said the government lacks the “political will” to tackle the problem in earnest. “Despite what is being done in Armenia, the expert and public perception is that not only has corruption not decreased but has even increased. Corruption has taken new forms, it has become more politicized and large scale,” she said during a seminar in Yerevan.

Experts also say that corruption cannot be stopped if perfect laws are passed. What matters more, they say, is the political will of the authorities: Without their backing, even the best anti-corruption programs will prove useless in Armenia.