



## Afghanistan in January 2016

### Politics and Peace

The New Year started with mixed hopes for peace in Afghanistan. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, officials from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US met to discuss a roadmap for peace. They agreed on an outline but Taliban envoys in Qatar reiterated that a formal process can only start after foreign troops leave the country. They also set forth other hard preconditions including removing the Taliban leaders' names from the UN sanctions list. The Afghan government said these preconditions are unacceptable. The third round of quadrilateral meetings on the peace process will be held in early February.

The Afghan government announced on the 18<sup>th</sup> that the much delayed parliamentary elections would take place on October 15<sup>th</sup>. The government has promised to bring reforms to the electoral bodies and process.

The diplomatic patience of Pakistan and India was tested in Afghanistan. Their consulates were attacked in Balkh and Nangarhar. No group claimed responsibility for the Indian consulate attack, though the attackers left Urdu graffiti written in blood. The attack on Pakistan's consulate was claimed by Islamic State. Relations between the rival neighbours are already tense because of attacks in their own countries. The high level of insecurity forced Tajikistan to close two of its consulates in Badakhshan and Kunduz.

Earlier this month, CEO Abdullah Abdullah visited Iran to expand bilateral ties in trade and the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking. He also visited Chabahar port, the closest harbour to Afghanistan, where over 100 Afghan companies have registered to invest in the free trade area.

### Security

As fighting between government forces and the Taliban in Helmand continued into the New Year, attacks on Kabul also increased. Multiple attacks took place near Kabul's international airport killing three civilians and injuring at least 38. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, two guards were injured after a rocket hit the Italian embassy in Kabul.

Media casualties were in the spotlight following the Taliban's attack on Moby Group's staff bus on the 20<sup>th</sup>. It killed seven mostly young staff and wounded 27 civilians. This is the deadliest attack on Afghan media to date. The attack follows Taliban threats made last year to Tolo News, a member of Moby Group, due to their coverage of the battle for Kunduz. Numerous vigils took place across Afghanistan commemorating the victims and denouncing the violence. Reportedly, Afghan forces have arrested eight suspects in connection to the incident.

On the 6<sup>th</sup>, officials announced the formation of a special force to counter Islamic State. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, many armed men related to Zahir Qadir, the Deputy Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament, joined public 'uprising' against insurgents in eastern Nangarhar province.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, it was reported that President Obama had made it easier for the US military to gain approval for targeted strikes on Islamic State militias in Afghanistan. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull visited Kabul on the 17<sup>th</sup> where he announced that his country will increase its troop commitment to Afghanistan.

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, the Pentagon stated that Lieutenant General John Nicholson will be the new commander of the international forces in Afghanistan. He is currently the head of NATO's Allied Land Command.

### Rights

Human Rights Watch, an international watchdog, raised concerns about the state of human rights in Afghanistan in its World Report 2016. It stated the Afghan government has made little progress on reining in abusive militias, reducing corruption, promoting women's rights and reforming the courts. It also criticised the insurgents for indiscriminate attacks against civilians.

Reza Gul, a 22-year old woman in Faryab, had her nose cut off by her husband. The incident was met with widespread condemnation across Afghanistan including by the Taliban spokesperson. Efforts are underway for Reza Gul to receive reconstructive surgery in Turkey. Security forces are still searching for her husband, who had recently taken another wife – only seven years old.

US officials announced that an investigation into the conduct of Navy forces in Afghanistan will be reopened. It will look at allegations that Navy forces and Afghan local police had tortured several detainees, including one who died, at an isolated outpost in 2012. The Pentagon has said it would release nearly 200 photographs documenting the abuse of prisoners at US detention centres in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Two government officials who posted their concerns about the safety of their provinces and lack of support from the central government onto Facebook were removed from their positions.

## **Humanitarian and Development**

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, the UN implored member states to keep humanitarian aid flowing to Afghanistan. They will need \$393 million to fund its humanitarian appeal. According to the UN, 8.1 million Afghans - about one-third of the population and 700,000 more than last year - need help this year. Funding for development efforts is expected to decrease too.

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, officials from the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations urged the European Union to accept Afghan refugees who have completed their migration documents. Afghanistan is the second highest ranking country of origin for asylum seekers in the European refugee crisis.

In an effort to treat drug addiction, the Afghan government turned the disused military training centre, Camp Phoenix, into a centre where drug users receive compulsory rehabilitation. Afghanistan is estimated to have around 2.4 million drug users. The centre will take 1,000 homeless drug addicts who will receive food, medical attention and treatment. Due to growing unemployment, concerns remain about the well-being of drug users when they leave the centre.

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, the watchdog Transparency International ranked Afghanistan the third most corrupt country in the world after Somalia and North Korea. It assessed factors such as public sector corruption and accountability in 167 countries. Inside Afghanistan, concerns were raised about “ghost soldiers” who are paid salaries but play no part in the Afghan forces. The head of Helmand's provincial council estimates that some 40% of registered forces don't exist.

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, UN mine clearance officials strongly condemned the murder of four de-miners by unknown militants in Helmand.

Kabul experienced major blackouts during the last week of January after the destruction of an electricity pylon in the Baghlan. During their fight with Afghan security forces insurgents blew up a key transmission line that brings electricity from Uzbekistan to Kabul.

## **People and Culture**

Lionel Messi, the football genius, came into contact with Afghanistan through 5-year-old fan Murtaza Ahmadi. A photo of Murtaza wearing a striped plastic bag, emblazoned with Messi's name, became a social media sensation and captured the football player's attention. Murtaza, who lives in a remote village in Ghazni, is too poor to afford a proper Messi football jersey and used the bag instead. He regularly argues with his brothers who are Cristiano Ronaldo fans. Messi has expressed his interest in meeting Murtaza.

In other sports news, Afghanistan's national cricket team received a hero's welcome in Kabul after winning the series against test-playing nation Zimbabwe. Afghanistan moved into the world top 10 for both one-day international and T20 cricket. The national football team who were defending their South Asian champion's title was defeated by India 2-1. And Afghan weightlifters won seven gold medals at India's Subrata Classic Open International Powerlifting, Benchpress and Deadlift Championship.

Afghan peace ambassador Nadir Shah, and his son Feruz Khan, entered the sixth month of their cycling for peace challenge. They are cycling 5,000 miles from their home in Afghanistan to New York. They have crossed 13 countries so far and are en route to meet UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.