



Afghanistan in February 2016

Politics and Peace

Officials from Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the US met in Kabul on the 23rd as part of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group to discuss the Afghan peace process. Pakistan has been asked to bring ten insurgent leaders to the peace table in the first week of March. The spokesperson of Hizb-e Islami, the country's second largest insurgent group, did not rule out taking part. The Taliban's political representatives in Qatar said they are unwilling to participate unless their preconditions are met. Islamic State affiliates have not been invited.

The Afghan Government appointed new members of the High Peace Council, the body responsible for negotiating with the Taliban. The new seven-member leadership is headed by Pir Syed Ahmad Ghilani, a Mujahideen leader, and includes a female member, Habiba Sarabi.

Notwithstanding the peace efforts, the Afghan Government and its allies continued their fight against insurgents. In late February, General Dostum, the Deputy President, headed to Faryab in an attempt to curtail the Taliban's activities. The United States and India provided four MI 24D and E29 aircrafts to Nangarhar-based Afghan forces. On the 24th, Russia gave its first major military aid to Afghanistan, in the form of 10,000 AK-47 rifles. Seventeen years ago this month, the last Russian troops left Afghanistan, ending their decade-long occupation of the country.

President Ashraf Ghani nominated two new high-level positions: Farid Hamidi, a prominent human rights supporter, for the Attorney General position, and Major General Taj Mohammed Jahid, for the Ministry of Interior. Their appointments need to be confirmed by the Parliament. The Ministry of Defence is still being run by a caretaker. The government is criticised for 'thousands' of vacant positions in Kabul and provinces.

Security

The 2015 UNAMA report on civilian casualties named 2015 the deadliest year for Afghan civilians since they began tracking data in 2007. The report found that over the past year 3,545 civilians died. An unprecedented one in four casualties in 2015 was a child, and 7,457 civilians were wounded. This shows a 4 percent increase over 2014. Anti-government elements and pro-government forces contributed to 62 percent and 17 percent of the casualties respectively. 21 percent of casualties could not be attributed to one specific party.

Attacks in Kabul, Helmand and other cities continued. On the 1st, a Taliban suicide bomber attacked a Kabul police complex killing at least 20 people and wounding 29 others. On the 27th, in two separate insurgent attacks, 25 Kabul residents were killed and many more injured. The Taliban reportedly control or contest at least 10 of the 14 districts in Helmand. On the 8th, a suicide bomber in Paktika killed at least nine people and wounded 23. On the 3rd, Nangarhar officials said international air strikes killed at least 29 Daesh fighters, radio presenters and internet operators.

Many Afghans had to deal with power cuts this month after major power lines were destroyed in Baghlan. After almost three weeks, Afghan security forces managed to reach the damaged power pylons. In response to the delays, frustrated Kabul residents staged protests against mounting insecurity and power outages. The incident, critics say, exposes the capital's vulnerability.

In Bamiyan, officials say they confiscated items from a Taliban arms depot, which they believe contained 30 Iranian-made mines. On the 19th, hundreds of Bamiyanis also protested against the poor road security.

Rights

On the 12th, President Ghani opened a fund to support victims of violence against women. The cabinet members have contributed 15 percent of their February salary to it. President Ghani said Afghanistan should restore its pre-war values which includes respecting women.

Many incidents of women's rights violations sparked media attention this month. A recent video received widespread condemnation across Afghanistan. It showed a pregnant woman giving birth to her baby outside the Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan hospital, a military medical facility in Kabul, after being refused care by hospital staff. On February 9th, it was reported that a young woman in Faryab who was accused of having a phone conversation with a male stranger was allegedly subjected to a public lashing by the Taliban as punishment.

On the 3rd, a 10-year-old Afghan boy, declared a hero after fighting the Taliban, was shot dead by insurgents while on his way to school. The involvement of minors in the war remains a big concern. In a recent report, Human Rights Watch said that during 2015 the Taliban in Kunduz recruited some 100 children and is using them as child soldiers.

A prominent writer and poet, Zubair Khaksar from Nanagarhar, was killed by unknown assailants in late-January. In other separate incidents, two radio journalists were hospitalized after gunmen attacked them in northern Afghanistan. International Media Support said that Afghanistan is the world's most dangerous country for reporters and media employees.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, an NGO, learned that Afghanistan civilian casualties from US airstrikes are at a seven-year high. The Bureau's research shows that on average a civilian was killed in every fourth drone or jet strike in 2015.

In late-February, human right activists criticized Macedonia for discriminating Afghan migrants from entering from Greece. About 5,000 Afghan refugees are stuck at the Greece-Macedonia border. On the 24th, 125 Afghan refugees voluntarily returned to Kabul from Germany.

Humanitarian and Development

The United Nations' Human Development Index report put Afghanistan in the low human development category - positioning it at 171 out of 188 countries. The life expectancy at birth was reported 60.4 in 2014 and the average expected years of schooling is 9.3.

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, an NGO, is calling for an independent investigation into a raid on their clinic in Wardak. They say Afghan forces accompanied by NATO troops killed three people, including a boy. In neighbouring Ghazni, unknown armed men kidnapped and then freed at least five employees of the International Committee of the Red Cross. On the 7th, Afghan officials said that three health workers involved in vaccinating Afghan children against polio were killed in Kunar.

Prolonged conflict in Baghlan forced numerous families to flee their homes. Over 350 families were displaced and are presently without shelter in the cold weather.

On the 13th, Denmark announced it will assist Afghan education with \$55 million. On the 15th, the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing said that the construction of 10,000 residential units would begin in Herat city. Meanwhile the Government cancelled the controversial Smart City housing contract signed with Khalilullah Frozi, one of the key convicts in the Kabul Bank scandal. The deal was signed with him while he was serving his 15-year prison sentence.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation said that Afghanistan will harvest an increased 4,000 kg of saffron this year. The ministry has provided training to around 200 farmers to help them cultivate the spice. Experts consider Afghanistan's saffron the best in the world. On the 26th, the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce & Industries said that Kandahar exported \$68 million in fruits in 10 months, an increase on previous periods.

People and Culture

Defying the economic gloom in the country, entrepreneurs Suleman Fatimie and Shakib Noori have invested their life savings in a bread shop in Kabul called Khanagi, 'Homemade'. The shop used social media to gain more popularity. They post photos of their whole grain breads and vegetarian options. Khanagi has attracted nearly 16,000 likes on Facebook.

On the 20th, a social initiative called Nigarish Now, 'New Insight', opened its Wall of Compassion in Kabul. People hung their spare clothes on the wall so that they could be taken by those who need it. Similar initiatives have been launched in Mazar and other Afghan cities.