



## Afghanistan in July 2015

### Politics and Peace

Peace talks with the Taliban played a central role this month. On the 7<sup>th</sup> the Afghan government finally used the word 'official' to describe their first 'brainstorming session' with the Taliban in Pakistan. Representatives present were from the Taliban's offices in Quetta and Qatar and the Haqqani Network. A post-Eid follow up meeting was announced, in China or Pakistan. Mullah Omar, the elusive Taliban leader, put out an Eid message in which he cautiously endorsed the peace talks. President Ghani received Mullah Omar's Eid message with gratitude. The US and China also welcomed the meeting. Chinese support of the process encourages observers who believe it will further cement Pakistani commitment.

The Government also hinted at possible amendments to the Constitution to allow Taliban inclusion in a power structure. Officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that, save the chapters regarding State and fundamental rights of citizens, all other parts of the Constitution are open for negotiation.

However, the Government's sudden statement on the 29<sup>th</sup>, 'based on credible information... that Mullah Mohammad Omar, leader of the Taliban died in April 2013' could be a game changer. The Taliban admitted the death and announced his successor, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. The date and situation of Mullah Omar's death remain unclear, and so does the death's impact on the peace process. Reports however reveal Taliban divisions over Mullah Mansour's appointment.

Afghan politicians, though united over a ceasefire with the Taliban, are divided about details of power sharing and negotiations. Vice President General Dostum, second Vice CEO Mohammad Mohaqiq and Governor of Balkh General Ata announced a new coalition to defend Afghans against those Taliban who continue to wage violence.

In other political news, Parliament rejected Masoom Stanekzai's nomination for Minister of Defence and Anisa Rassouli's nomination to the Supreme Court. 20 female MPs were absent from the vote, which proved detrimental to Rassouli. She needed only six more votes to be the country's first female member of the Supreme Court. The appointment of Sayed Yousaf Haleem as the Chief Justice of Afghanistan was approved.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> President Ghani appointed the Head and 13 members of the Electoral System Reform Commission. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the Commission announced that preliminary reforms needed for parliamentary elections will be in place within two months. A number of election monitoring groups expressed doubts about the Commission's capacity to implement these.

### Security

On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, over 20 Afghan Local Police were killed when the Taliban attacked checkpoints in Jalrez district of Wardak province. After MPs questioned unacceptable delays in providing support to the beleaguered police, President Ghani assigned a delegation to investigate the incident, which some claim is a tribal issue.

Northern provinces suffered significant security losses. The Taliban seized control of over 100 villages in Faryab, where officials warned the provincial capital Maymana could fall to the militants. They also stated that local pro-government forces, called the 'People's Resistance Front', are the province's only defence. In Badakhshan, the Tīrgaran military base was over-run by the Taliban on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Over 100 police officers reportedly surrendered to the insurgents after government reinforcements failed to reach them. A task team was appointed to investigate reports that a deal between the police and the Taliban pre-empted the attack. Taliban gains were also reported in Kunduz and Sar-e-Pul provinces.

A mis-directed US airstrike killed eight Afghan soldiers on the 20<sup>th</sup>. Whilst the US claimed responsibility and launched investigations, Afghan senators angrily questioned the accidental nature and called for a similar attack in response.

Civilian suffering continued in July. 33 people died after a car bomb on the 12<sup>th</sup> near a US and Afghan army base in Khost province. The next day 29 were injured in a bomb attack at a mosque in Baghlan province in which 500 worshippers were attending an Iftar dinner. A car bomb in a crowded market killed 19 on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, again in Faryab.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> Gulbuddin Hekmatyar announced his Hezb-e-Islami party will support Islamic State (IS) should tensions escalate between IS and the Taliban. In an interview, President Ghani claimed that if the Taliban were Terrorism v1, the modern approaches of IS is Terrorism v6.

## Human Rights

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> an appeal court over-ruled the four death sentences handed out in the Farkhunda murder case. They were reduced to 10 and 20 year jail sentences. Rights activists and lawmakers responded angrily, claiming the appeals court had bowed to the conservative religious establishment.

Rights activists in Balkh also called for punishment of those responsible for the brutal rape and murder of Yunus, a three year old boy in Kabul. Fearing a muted government response, one activist urged locals to arrest and punish the perpetrators before handing them to the police.

## Development & Humanitarian

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) released a series of reports criticising US spending in Afghanistan. On July 1<sup>st</sup> they accused USAID of providing inaccurate data on the locations of 80% of the health clinics it funds. USAID chalked up the inaccuracies to limited GPS technology in Afghanistan. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, SIGAR alleged US-backed rule of law programmes lacked a clear strategy and poor monitoring of money spent. And on the 20<sup>th</sup>, it claimed the US military failed to stop construction on a \$14.7 million warehouse once it became clear no one would use it.

The Afghan government finalised a Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development with the European Union on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. In an effort to combat alarming levels of malnutrition, the UN World Food Programme partnered with Nutrition Education International to increase soya bean cultivation and consumption across Afghanistan.

The World Peace Forum in Beijing concluded with a renewed call for Afghanistan's allies and neighbours to more fully engage in the stability, peace and development of Afghanistan. Pakistan increased tariffs on imports of fresh fruit from Afghanistan, violating the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit and Trade Agreement. This led farmers to lose US\$4 million in just 20 days.

Humanitarian space was threatened on the 3<sup>rd</sup> as armed Afghan Special Forces raided a Médecins Sans Frontières trauma centre. In a separate incident, unknown gunmen opened fire in a Kabul mental health hospital on the 14<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, the EU announced a new \$45.4 million aid package to help Afghans improve basic health services. This came amid renewed concerns over the lack of mental health treatment for the millions of Afghans suffering from PTSD.

The flood season started at the end of the month with 12 provinces suffering heavy rain and flash floods. These affected more than 2,500 families. Over 700 Afghans have lost their lives in natural disasters since the beginning of the year.

The UN reported an increase in the internal displacement of people, citing insecurity and rising returnees from Pakistan. Other refugee news included a damning report of Britain deporting 18 year-old Afghan refugees who originally arrived in the UK as unaccompanied minors, whilst UNHCR Turkey struggled to resettle Afghans to third countries, since some are prioritising Syrian refugees.

## People, Culture & Sport

The Afghan national cricket team secured their place in the ICC World Twenty20 after winning qualifying matches against the Netherlands, the United Arab Emirates, Scotland, and Papua New Guinea.

A new satirical Facebook page called 'Kabul Taxi' gained popularity. It speaks to the frustrations of Afghan citizens by poking fun at the country's politicians, warlords, and bureaucrats. Photographer David Fox began a *Humans of Kabul* Facebook page. Set up in similar style to the widely popular *Humans of New York* project, the page displays candid shots of Afghans commenting on their daily life and experiences.