



## Afghanistan in June 2016

### Politics

On the 1<sup>st</sup>, Pakistan introduced a new border management system at the Torkham crossing, which requires all Afghans to have valid passports and visas to enter Pakistan. Pakistani officials said this would help control the illegal cross-border movement of militants. Up to 15,000 people use the crossing and an estimated 60 per cent of imported goods enter Afghanistan through Torkham. This, along with the construction of a gate by Pakistan on allegedly disputed territory, led to skirmishes between Afghan security forces and Pakistani troops on the 11<sup>th</sup>. At least four soldiers were killed and a combined 40 wounded from both sides. A week later the border was reopened, following diplomatic efforts. The border tensions also resulted in increased persecution of Afghans in Pakistani cities and visa control measures remain enforced.

To President Ghani's dismay, the members of the Lower House of Parliament rejected his legislative decree on electoral reforms. Despite this vote, the government announced it would continue its efforts to hold elections. On a happier note, the Parliament approved Masoom Stanikzai as the chief of the National Directorate of Security and General Abdullah Khan Habibi as the Minister of Defence. This is Afghanistan's first Minister of Defence under the National Unity Government, which came into power in late 2014.

### Security

June coincided with the fasting month of Ramadan, during which warfare is religiously prohibited. However, violence loomed in many parts of the country. In the Taliban heartland in southern Afghanistan, the insurgent group gained greater ground by controlling more police checkpoints on the main roads and highways. This posed grave threats to travellers. In different events in Kunduz, Sar-e Pul and Helmand, Taliban kidnapped at least 89 travellers. Whilst the majority were released, at least thirty remain in Taliban custody. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the UN expressed their deep concern at the spate of abductions, hostage-taking, and summary executions carried out against those travelling in civilian vehicles.

Taliban fighters continued to target public courts and judges, the Afghan police, and international security contractors in almost all regions of the country, including the capital. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, Taliban suicide attackers killed at least 30 and injured 53 other police cadets. The attack was one of the deadliest carried out against the Afghan police in recent years. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, they killed 14 Nepalese and Indian security contractors in Kabul who worked for the Canadian Embassy. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, the Taliban killed Akram Nejat, the new Attorney General of Logar along with six others just as his inauguration ceremony was ending. On the same day, they killed Sher Wali Wardak, a Member of Parliament.

A UN report on the 21<sup>st</sup> also said violence has increased by 14 percent in the first three months of 2016, compared to the same period last year. The Taliban now hold and threaten more territory than any time since 2001. In eastern Afghanistan, Islamic State (Daesh) fighters killed six police officers on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Clashes in various districts of Nangarhar continued throughout the month. Local officials said more than 131 Daesh fighters were killed by drone strikes and ground combat. Government forces said they killed the Taliban's so-called Governor of Paktika and 56 other insurgents on the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

To address the increasing threat of Taliban, on the 10<sup>th</sup>, President Barack Obama granted U.S. military commanders more freedom to strike Taliban targets. According to the New York Times 'airstrikes will no longer have to be justified as necessary to defend American troops' – a similar argument was used when targeting the killed Taliban leader last month. Instead American commanders can now use air power against the Taliban 'when they see fit'. Afghan military authorities welcomed this decision which they hope will increase their capacity during ground operations. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the Pentagon confirmed that US warplanes struck Taliban positions under these new guidelines.

This month, Obama was expected to announce that the number of American forces in Afghanistan would be cut by nearly half by the beginning of 2017. However, his announcement was delayed. Presently, there are 9,804 American troops (6,954 to train and help Afghan forces and 2,850 on separate counter terrorism missions) in Afghanistan.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> a US official said his country plans to provide more than \$3 billion a year in support to the Afghan security forces from 2018 through 2020. British Secretary of State for Defence Michael Fallon visited Kabul on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. He said that security in Afghanistan is a global issue and Britain's presence will help defeat terrorism. Britain has 352 troops in Afghanistan as part of the NATO Resolute Support mission.

## **Rights**

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, the UN announced Afghanistan as contributing the third largest group of refugees (2.7 million) after Palestine and Syria. The number of refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide reached a record 65.3 million last year. In another report on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the International Committee of the Red Cross said that almost 85 percent of the migrants that have gone missing on their way to European countries are Afghans. An estimated 250,000 undocumented Afghans have migrated to Europe. Some have lost their lives at sea.

American journalist David Gilkey and his translator Zabihullah Tamana were killed during a Taliban ambush in Helmand on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Gilkey is the first American journalist not linked to the military who has been killed during the 15-year-long Afghan conflict. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, Afghan journalists slammed the government's move to ban the use of camera drones on the pretext of security concerns. Media outlets who have used camera drones for reporting view this as part of government's efforts to curb media activists.

On the 12<sup>th</sup>, Aziz Gul, a woman from Ghor, was shot dead by gunmen on charges of escaping from home. Such summary executions mostly take place at the behest of insurgents. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, Dilbar Nazari, the Minister of Women's Affairs, responded to the incident by calling on the Taliban to punish the perpetrators of violence against women according to Sharia.

On the 10<sup>th</sup>, it was reported that nearly 99 percent of Hindus and Sikhs have left Afghanistan over the past three decades. Persecution and property grabbing - especially during the civil war and Taliban rule - were the main reasons behind their exodus. The remaining population - estimated to be 1,350 - face joblessness and continued social and religious discrimination.

## **Humanitarian and Development**

On the 4<sup>th</sup>, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Salma Dam. Built over a drawn-out period of 40 years because of conflict, the dam generates 42 megawatts of electricity for about 40,000 families and will irrigate 80,000 hectares of farmland.

On the 6<sup>th</sup>, Global Witness, a campaigning NGO, announced that the profits from the trade of Afghanistan's natural resources (including lapis lazuli) are going into the pockets of local warlords, the Taliban, and powerful politicians. The value of lapis lazuli was estimated to bring in \$125 million a year in 2014. Global Witness urged that lapis lazuli be classified as a 'conflict mineral'. 'This powerful resource for reconstructions and development has become a major source of conflict and grievance', according to Global Witness.

On the 30<sup>th</sup>, Ghani inaugurated the Specialised Anti-Corruption Justice Centre in Kabul. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, he sacked top officials from the Kabul international airport over negligence. He also instructed that all officials working for more than 5 years in the airport be replaced.

On the 1<sup>st</sup>, unknown gunmen killed three local employees of Focus Humanitarian Assistance, a local affiliate of the Agha Khan Development Network. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, Judith D'Souza, an Indian staff member of the same network, was kidnapped in Kabul.

## **People and Culture**

Afghan officials criticised Iran and Turkey for trying to list Masnavi Ma'navi, a collection of Rumi's poems, with UNESCO as part of their countries' joint heritage. Born in 1207 in present day Afghanistan, the mystic is the top-selling poet in the US. David Franzoni, an Oscar-winning screenwriter has agreed to work on Rumi's biopic, which is said to star Leonardo DiCaprio. Rumi may have found the debate about his heritage saddening given that wrote, 'I am neither of the East nor of the West, no boundaries exist within my breast.'