



Afghanistan in August 2016

Politics

Afghan politics was dominated this month by an emerging rift between President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah. On the 11th Abdullah Abdullah denounced his governing partner President Ghani as ‘unfit’ to govern, citing failures to consult on key political decisions and lack of action over necessary political reforms. President Ghani responded sharply to the claims, saying they were against the principles of governance. The two leaders met one-on-one on the 17th and the 25th in an attempt to ease the political uncertainty caused by their public disagreements.

As the two-year anniversary of the National Unity Government approaches, the commission responsible for monitoring the implementation of the post-election agreement announced this month that many key commitments were still to be realised. Attempts to bring about long-delayed electoral reform drew a mixed response from monitoring groups, who argued that plans to bring in a single-seat constituency system were problematic and beyond current capacities. On the 23rd the Specialised Anti-Corruption Justice Centre officially opened its doors, amongst a backdrop of reports that as many as six senior officials have yet to formally register their assets as requested by the international community.

On an international level Afghanistan seemed to be nurturing closer ties to India, with army chief Gen. Shahim arriving in New Delhi on the 30th for a visit expected to feature a new pledge of military aid. Meanwhile, Afghan-Pakistani relations continued to be unreliable. The Wesh-Chaman border crossing remained closed at time of writing following an incident involving a group of Afghan protesters burning a Pakistani flag on the 18th. It was also reported on the 30th, that Afghans with Indian visas in their passports were in some cases being refused entry to Pakistan.

Peace and security

On the 14th, the Ministry of Defence announced that security forces were currently fighting insurgents in 15 different provinces across Afghanistan. Most notably, the Taliban made advances this month on two major cities – Lashkargah in Helmand province to the south, and Kunduz to the north. Reports emerged regarding the presence of a new elite Taliban commando force, with refined battlefield techniques and sophisticated equipment aiding their operations on multiple fronts. Whilst the insurgents were ultimately held off in both instances, concerns continued to be raised regarding lack of coordination and supplies amongst government forces. On the 22nd US forces deployed an additional 100 troops to Lashkargah to bolster the Afghan defence of the city.

On the 12th, the Pentagon confirmed that the leader of Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan had been killed the previous month in a US drone strike. Rumours of a new IS presence in the southern province of Zabul emerged on the 14th, however these were played down in the days after.

This month the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul was the target of two separate attacks. On the 7th, two foreign professors were kidnapped at gunpoint by men dressed as Afghan security forces. On the 24th, the university campus was attacked by gunmen in a 10-hour siege, with at least 16 confirmed victims, seven of which were students, and another 53 wounded. No group immediately came forward to claim either attack.

In more encouraging news reports emerged on the 6th, that a delegation from the insurgent group Hizb-e-Islami would resume peace talks with the Afghan government. On the 4th, Afghanistan formed a Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism along with neighbours China, Pakistan and Tajikistan, aimed at improving regional efforts in counter-terrorism. Intelligence officials also announced on the 29th that Australian aid worker Kerry Jane Wilson had been rescued, following her kidnapping by armed militants in April.

Rights

On the 29th, reports emerged from Bamiyan city that Afghan security forces physically assaulted, detained, and confiscated equipment from journalists following an Enlightening Movement protest. Demonstrators had been protesting the route of a major power transmission line during President Ghani's visit to the area, with violence breaking out when security forces attempted to disperse the crowd.

A high-profile civil society campaign continued to draw attention to the custom of 'bad dadan', a traditional practice whereby women are traded in marriage in order to resolve disputes between families. Khan Wali Adel's four-month sit-in protest near Parliament House in Kabul culminated in the Ulema Council, the highest Islamic body, issuing a fatwa against the practice on the 14th.

Humanitarian and Development

It was reported this month that up to 30,000 were fleeing violence in Helmand province, causing a humanitarian crisis in the encircled city of Lashkargah. The impact of conflict and instability on education was highlighted in a report by Human Rights Watch, which condemned the use of schools by the state military for combat missions. In addition, the Education Ministry released a statement on the 9th reporting that almost 600 schools remained closed across Afghanistan due to ongoing instability.

On the 28th, the first train carrying freight containers from China to Afghanistan left the eastern Chinese city of Nantong. Passing through Xinjiang border and Central Asian countries the train will arrive in Hairatan port in the north of Afghanistan. Two trains carrying at least 26 tonnes of freight are scheduled each month. Afghanistan hopes to export commodities such as marble, saffron and dry fruit to China.

A polio vaccination campaign has been re-launched nationwide, with a particular focus on eastern provinces previously held by IS. The new drive, coordinated by UNICEF and the Ministry of Public Health, will reach 137 districts in 14 provinces in an attempt to eliminate the virus.

People and Culture

Afghanistan was represented by three athletes at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro – one of which being female 100m runner Kimia Yusufi. Mohammed Naeem Durani, a disabled javelin thrower, became the first Afghan national to successfully qualify for the Paralympic Games based on his past competitive track record. In other sports news, the fifth season of the Roshan Afghan Premier League kicked-off with a spectacular opening ceremony on the 25th. At least 18.6 million viewers tuned in for last year's Championship final.

102 cultural assets, pillaged from historical sites and museums during past conflict, are due to be returned to Afghanistan with the help of a Japanese NGO. These include relics from the Bamiyan caves as well as the 'Left Foot of Zeus' statue fragment.

The Ministry of Public Health opened its first 'physical change and sexual health advice centre' in Kabul. It will provide free, confidential services to its youth target audience, who cannot seek advice from doctors or support from parents due to the dominant conservative culture.