



Afghanistan in April 2017

Peace and Politics

On the 28th, fugitive warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the Hezb-e Islami party, appeared in public for the first time after two decades underground. This was the result of a peace deal signed between the Afghan Government and Hezb-e Islami last year. A day later, speaking at a gathering, he criticised the Taliban for their 'pointless and meaningless' violence against the Afghan people and called for them to join the 'caravan of peace'. The Taliban were also criticised by former President Karzai after their attack on an Afghan military base this month. Karzai vowed he would no longer refer to the Taliban as 'dissatisfied brothers' and labelled them 'puppets of foreigners' and a 'terrorist group'.

Two senior American security officials visited Afghanistan this month. US Secretary of Defence James Mattis visited Kabul more than a week after US National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster visited the country. They met Afghan leaders and reiterated US commitment to improve Afghanistan's security and stability. The US is reportedly mulling over whether to increase their soldiers in Afghanistan.

General Nicholson, America's top general in Afghanistan, expressed confidence that Russia is providing arms to the Taliban. The Russian Foreign Minister rejected the allegation. On the 1st, Russian President's envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, said the Taliban's call for opposing foreign military presence in Afghanistan was justified. 'Who's in favour of [international military presence in Afghanistan]? Name me one neighbouring state that supports it', he asked in a media interview.

On the 17th, President Ghani fired Ahmad Zia Massoud as his special representative for reform and good governance. Massoud said he had not been given any official notice and only learnt about his removal from media reports. On the 20th, Farooq Wardak, the former Minister of Education, was appointed as the Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs.

On the 5th, CEO Abdullah's office announced that the Parliamentary and District Council elections will be held by the end of this Afghan calendar year (20 March 2018). The Afghanistan Independent Election Commission still hasn't finalised budget negotiations with donor countries.

Security

This month the Taliban gained more territory in the Southern, Northeast, and Northern parts of the country and suffered casualties. On the 28th, the day the Taliban announced their spring offensive, they managed to capture Zibak district of Badakhshan. In Helmand, militants now largely control seven of fourteen districts and another five are contested. On the 7th, the Taliban raised their flag on Baghlan-Kunduz highway. But on the 19th, Afghan forces supported by American aircrafts raided Taliban in the Dand-e Ghor area of Baghlan, killing a Taliban shadow governor and dozens more insurgents. On the 26th, local officials said infighting between Taliban and Daesh affiliates in Jawzjan killed 76 Taliban and 15 Daesh fighters.

On the 21st, the Taliban conducted their deadliest attack on the Afghan armed forces. Dressed in Afghan military uniforms and driving military vehicles, about 10 Taliban militants made their way into an army base in Mazar-e Sharif and opened fire on troops who were leaving Friday prayers. The attackers killed at least 136 soldiers, mostly young recruits, and were eventually gunned down after three hours of battle. A national day of mourning was held two days later. Three days later, President Ghani accepted the resignations of Defence Minister Abdullah Habibi and army Chief Qadam Shah Shaheem. In a move that surprised many, President Ghani then nominated them as ambassadors to Jordan and Kazakhstan, respectively.

On the 13th, US officials dropped their biggest non-nuclear bomb on Daesh fighters in Nangarhar province. It was the first time this type of bomb, a Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) with 11 tons of TNT, has been used in combat. The Afghan government announced that the network of caves used by Daesh were destroyed and about 100 militants were killed as a result. However, the Afghan army's ground operation with American air support continued against Daesh targets in the district two weeks after the attack, as hundreds of similar caves in the area are still operable and used by militants.

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Rights

On the 25th, a UN report spoke of high levels of torture in Afghanistan. Based on their research, 45 percent of 468 conflict-related detainees said they were tortured or ill-treated. The figure represents the highest level documented since the UN began monitoring in 2010.

On the 27th, the UN said civilian casualties caused by war in Afghanistan declined slightly in the first three months of 2017. Officials mostly attributed this rare decline to residents fleeing areas of fighting. From January to March there were 715 civilians killed and 1,466 wounded, representing an overall 4 percent decrease compared to the same period last year.

On the 20th, officials in Kunar said militants have stopped polio vaccination campaigns, depriving an estimated 6,000 children in the province from receiving the vaccine. Nearly 150,000 children in insecure districts throughout the country will not receive polio vaccinations because of insecurity.

On the 30th, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and journalists criticised Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's attacks on the media. They called for him to come to terms with the values of present day Afghanistan, in which free press is cherished. Hekmatyar previously condemned certain media outlets in Afghanistan, accusing them of serving the colonial agenda of foreign countries and promoting non-Afghan cultural values.

Humanitarian and Development

Bamiyan got its first public hospital on the 24th. With 141 beds and a solar power system that optimises power, it is one of the biggest hospitals in the country. The \$ 22.8 million hospital was constructed in four years by the Agha Khan Foundation with donations from Canadian individuals, and the Canadian and French governments.

The Anti-Corruption Justice Centre (ACJC) announced on the 11th that they have detained Abdul Ghafar Dawi, a businessman accused of embezzlement, fraud, and ignoring court orders. Dawi was also under investigation for the infamous Kabul Bank scandal. On the 10th, in an unrelated event, unknown gunmen shot dead two ACJC staff in Kabul.

Transparency International, an independent watchdog, reported that corruption in Afghanistan prevents humanitarian aid from getting to where it needs to go. Common instances of corruption were seen during negotiations between NGOs and public officials when selecting target areas for projects; access to certain areas; inappropriate interference in the selection of beneficiaries; risks of nepotism, and ethnic bias in staff hiring, among others.

Officials at the Ministry of Finance said they will spend approximately \$1 million through decentralised provincial budgeting this year. This policy will decentralise resource allocation decisions and is currently being implemented by four ministries. The plan is to increase the number of participating ministries from four to fifteen over the next three years.

On the 1st, Shen Heting, the former general manager of the Chinese state-owned company which secured the Mes Aynak copper deal in Afghanistan in 2007, was expelled from the Communist Party for corruption charges at home.

During President Ghani's trip to Australia on the 4th, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull pledged Australian support to Afghanistan until 2020 and signed a \$ 240 million development agreement. Mr. Ghani's visit to the country attracted additional press as hundreds of Hazara protesters in Australia accused him of discriminatory policies.

People and Culture

Afghan women engineers have been making successful inroads in the male dominated profession. 27 female engineers are involved in the \$16 million restoration project of the historic Darulaman Palace. On the 18th, Wazhma Khoram, one of the engineers, said their role in the project is not symbolic but vital to its success.

On the 1st, the Afghan cricket team returned home to a hero's welcome. Afghanistan beat rival Ireland in all three formats of Cricket to top on the Associate Cricket Nations' list. 18-year-old Afghan bowler Rashid Khan is making waves in India. In the annual Indian Premier League, he has become the man of the match twice and is one of the most talked about players.

On the 19th, Kabul hosted a culture and idea exchange forum of about 70 young men and women from eight South Asian countries. A participant from Sri Lanka said he came to Afghanistan against advice of all relatives, who thought it would be too insecure. He said he found the country to be wonderful and beautiful.

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