



Afghanistan in March 2017

Politics

March saw some progress against the long overdue electoral efforts. On the 1st, President Ghani appointed Imam Mohammad Warimach as the Secretary General of the Independent Election Commission. A day later, President Ghani issued an order paving the way for the rollout of electronic ID cards - he approved an amendment to the Census Law which allows for the mention of both nationality and ethnicity of Afghan citizens on the ID cards. The issue had been cause for great debate and created polarised political views.

Border tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan continued in March. On the 10th, Afghanistan's Permanent Representative to the UN complained to the UN Security Council about Pakistan's attacks on Afghanistan. He said the Pakistani military had violated Afghan territory at least 59 times, including three violations of air space. He said 1,375 Pakistani cross frontier artillery shelling caused dozens of casualties and the displacement of 450 families.

The Afghan borders of Torkham and Chaman were closed for most of the month only to be reopened on the 21st. The closed border stranded thousands of people and about 5,000 trade containers resulting in price hikes in Kabul and other provinces. The borders were closed unilaterally by Pakistan last month after they blamed Afghanistan-based terrorists for a terrorist attack in Pakistan.

On the 26th, Pakistan said it had begun building a fence along its border with Afghanistan. This move could further deteriorate relations between the two countries as Kabul doesn't recognise hundreds of miles of Pakistan's northwest border.

Security

On the 23rd, the Taliban captured the strategic district of Sangin in the southern province of Helmand, according to local officials. It was the culmination of a years-long offensive that took the lives of more combatants than any other fight for territory in Afghanistan. The Taliban also made some headway in the North. After months of besieging the Tala Wa Barfak district of Baghlan, they captured it on the 1st and controlled it for two days before being driven out by Afghan security forces.

On the 8th, five ISIS gunmen attacked Sardar Daud Khan Hospital and killed at least 50 people and wounded dozens more. The attack was carried out in broad daylight and went on for about seven hours before Afghan forces killed all the perpetrators. Later, 24 people were arrested in connection with the attack. This incident contributed to the Parliament impeaching three top security officials: the ministers for defence and interior affairs, and head of intelligence. On the 27th, they all survived a vote of no-confidence.

Medical facilities in Afghanistan endured more than 240 attacks by armed groups in 2015 and 2016 according to Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, a charity.

On the 1st, Taliban killed at least 16 people in two attacks on an Afghan police station and an intelligence agency branch in Kabul. Media outlets also reported heavy Taliban and ISIS casualties as part of various infightings with Afghan security forces across the country.

Rights

The Taliban continued to mete out harsh punishments in their controlled areas. On the 13th, the Taliban in Herat cut off a hand and a foot of Ghulam Farooq, a 15-year-old man; he was accused of theft. Earlier this month, militants in Badakhshan stoned a woman to death; she was accused of adultery.

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On the 20th, a seven-year-old girl from Badakhshan was raped, allegedly by her own father. Hajera Baharistani, a doctor in Badakhshan Central Hospital said the victim's physical health had improved but she suffers from the trauma: 'when we go close to her, she screams.' The father is in police custody and denies the charges.

On the 23rd, Save the Children, an international charity, said that 3.7 million Afghan children (nearly a third of the country's child population) are unable to attend school. This leaves them at increased risk of child labour and other forms of exploitation. This year, more than 400,000 Afghan children are expected to drop out of school due to growing instability and deportations from Pakistan.

The Afghan Women Judges Association said the number of female judges has increased in the country. There are now 260 female judges in Afghanistan, the majority of whom work in Kabul, Herat and Balkh. President Ghani's attempts to appoint a female member of the Supreme Court didn't succeed in 2015 as the nominee failed to receive enough votes from Parliament.

Humanitarian and Development

Beijing continued to raise its development profile in Afghanistan. On the 16th, Afghanistan and China signed a \$73 million housing project financed by China. The project will see construction of 10,000 housing units for Afghan civil servants.

On the 4th, the Afghan government signed-off on the Barikab Agricultural Economic Zone project with three companies. An area of 174 square kilometres is planned to contain 1,000 new factories, employing about 35,000 people.

Reports emerged that workers are forced to work under unfavourable conditions. In Kabul Industrial Park, workers have to accept monthly wages as low as 5500 Afs (\$82) for working 12 hours a day, six days a week.

Afghanistan moved against a network of Afghan Turk Schools and ordered them to be brought under a Turkish Government controlled entity. The schools have been active in several Afghan cities since 2015. This move appears to be in response to Turkey's campaign against followers of Fethullah Gulen, a US-based cleric it accuses of being behind the Turkish coup attempt of July 2016.

On the 28th, seven months after a deadly attack killed 13 people, students at the American University of Afghanistan returned to classes for the first time. This coeducational private university has more than 1,700 students. The attack doesn't seem to have deterred the students as the enrolments this year are slightly higher.

On the 27th, anti-corruption officials said they arrested Maj. Gen. M. Moein Faqir, the former commander of the Afghan National Army in Helmand, on charges that included misuse of food money meant to supply his soldiers.

People and Culture

On the 2nd, Masuma Hassani won the fifth round of the Afghan Ski Challenge for girls in Bamian. Her message to other women were that they should 'always feel powerful. They should never accept defeat. Position is not important; courage is important'.

Masuma's male compatriots Sajjad Husaini and Sayed Ali Shah Farhang are training in the Swiss Alps for the 2018 Winter Olympics. Their Swiss trainer is impressed with their incredible progress: 'Two years ago when they first started, they couldn't ski parallel, but now they are racing.' As children, Sajjad and Sayed fled to Iran with their families to escape Afghanistan's violence. Their instinct for survival may have helped them make such extraordinary progress.

Caravanserai, a three-day cultural festival in Kabul hosted artists, poets and singers from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan in early March. Zeb, a female Pakistani singer famous in Afghanistan, became the festival's most popular performer after showcasing her creative remixes of Afghans songs.

Afghan Star's 12th year finished with pure entertainment. For the first time a male rapper and a female singer made it to the finals. Sayed Jamal Mubarez, a 22 year old rapping barber won the title this year. He won over many hearts after offering his award to Zulala Hashemi, the 18-year-old runner-up, to acknowledge her courage for singing on TV. He still has some hearts to capture at home as his religious mother disapproves of the music and switches the channel when songs come on.

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