



## Afghanistan in January 2018

### Peace

Renewed peace efforts were shrouded in ambiguity and contradictions in January. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, a five-member Taliban delegation held preliminary talks with the Afghan government in Turkey. Mawlai Abdul Rauf, one of the delegates who claimed to be a Taliban leader said he represented all Taliban factions except those individuals that don't opt for intra-Afghan peace talks. This claim was rejected by a Taliban spokesperson who said the delegation didn't represent them. Similarly, the Afghan government said their representatives in Turkey were acting in a personal capacity. But on the 17<sup>th</sup>, two senior Taliban officials said that their leader Haibatullah Akhundzada had approved another exploratory meeting in Islamabad in order to restart peace talks.

On the 29<sup>th</sup>, President Trump rejected the idea of talks with the Taliban after a series of deadly attacks in Afghanistan. His comments suggest he sees a military victory against the Taliban, an outcome that military and diplomatic officials say cannot be achieved with the resources and manpower he has authorised. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, the US government blacklisted six members of Taliban and Haqqani network. Abdul Baseer, one of the individuals is said to have led the finance commission of the Taliban's Peshawar wing.

The US and Afghanistan continued to exert pressure on Pakistan to do more for the Afghan peace process. President Trump threatened to cut off billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan, accusing Islamabad of being a safe haven for extremists. In his first tweet of 2018, Trump said that the United States has “foolishly” given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid over the last 15 years, “and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools.” On the 4<sup>th</sup>, US officials announced that they will continue withholding \$225 million in already budgeted military aid and threatened that it would freeze all security assistance to Pakistan. On the 31<sup>st</sup>, top Afghan security officials travelled to Islamabad to submit evidence about Taliban leaders' presence in Pakistan and demanded that they be arrested.

### Politics

In January President Ghani was embroiled in confrontation with provincial powerbrokers who challenged his authority as leader of the country. Wrangles continued over the 18<sup>th</sup> December removal of Atta Mohammad Noor as the governor of Balkh. Noor, who is the Secretary General of the Jamiat-e Islami (the country's largest Tajik political party) has defiantly refused to step down from the position. Worrying that the tensions would strain the country's already fragile stability, Western diplomats and the White House called for a peaceful and legal settlement of the issue. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Kandahar Police Chief General Abdul Raziq responded to rumours of being ousted from his position, saying that he has been appointed by the people and the state cannot remove him.

On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the governor of Farah resigned citing worsening security and political interference and corruption among security forces. The province has seen months of fighting with some accusing the security forces of collusion with Taliban militants involved in cross-border smuggling and drug trafficking.

### Security

January was one of the deadliest winter months in the last fifteen years. Taliban and Daesh fighters continued targeting civil and military targets throughout the country. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, deadly Taliban suicide attacks killed more than 103 people and wounded at least 235 in Kabul's most heavily protected area, close to foreign embassies and government buildings. It was the worst attack seen in the capital since a truck bomb near the German embassy killed 150 people last May. The attacks involved two vehicles painted as ambulances.

*This report is developed based on media reports. Although BAAG has taken necessary precautions to include only credible sources, it does not take responsibility for incorrect content.*

On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Taliban gunmen killed at least twenty people, including fourteen foreigners, during a thirteen-hour siege on the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel. Nine foreigners (seven Ukrainian, two Venezuelan) were staff of Kam Air Aviation Company. Kam Air also sustained over \$1 million in financial losses. Four victims were American. A day later, Daesh fighters attacked the UK charity Save the Children in Nangarhar, killing four members of staff and one Afghan soldier.

On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the United States Air Force said international troops dropped 4,300 bombs in Afghanistan in 2017, targeting terrorist groups. The number of airstrikes in 2017 was double the amount carried out in the past two years combined.

On the 31<sup>st</sup>, BBC said based on their research, Taliban fighters are now openly active in 70% of Afghanistan. The study shows the Taliban are now in full control of 14 districts (that's 4% of the country) and have an active and open physical presence in a further 263 (66%), significantly higher than previous estimates of Taliban strength. In response, Afghan defence officials said BBC's research methodology was flawed and claimed most parts of the country is under government control.

## **Rights**

On the 15<sup>th</sup>, the Lower House of parliament dismissed a controversial decree recently issued by President Ghani on the regulation of public gatherings, strikes and demonstrations. The decree bans holding any kind of protests and demonstrations near government institutions and public roads. MPs called the decree undemocratic and unconstitutional.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, CEO Abdullah laid the foundation stone for a memorial in Kabul in memory of media victims killed in Afghanistan in the past 16 years. Twelve media staff lost their lives in Afghanistan in 2017 alone.

## **Humanitarian & Development**

On the 14<sup>th</sup>, the UN announced that aid agencies would need \$430 million this year to help the most vulnerable Afghans across the country. The money would be used to assist 2.8 million people displaced by conflict or natural disasters. Assistance includes emergency shelter and food, to treat patients injured by conflict, to feed malnourished children or assist vulnerable families returning home after years in Iran or Pakistan.

On the 31<sup>st</sup>, Pakistani officials said Afghan refugees might be given a five-month extension of their stay. Pakistan is home to the world's second-largest refugee population, with a total of 2.5 million Afghans. On the same day, Oxfam released a report about the plight of forced returnees in Afghanistan and called on host countries to stop deporting Afghans in the current dangerous conditions.

On the 14<sup>th</sup>, Afghanistan's Carpet Association said carpet exports increased 15% in the last 10 months compared with the same period last year. Afghan carpets are exported to Europe, the United States and some countries in the region.

On the 13<sup>th</sup>, the Afghani currency's value dropped to a record low against the American dollar (\$1 = 70 Afs), amid the political tension between President Ghani and Atta Mohammad Noor.

On the 31<sup>st</sup>, Gulajan Abdulbadi Sayyad was elected as the new head of the Independent Election Commission (IEC). Sayyad was previously the spokesman for the IEC. Electoral reforms including the distribution of electronic national IDs are considerably delayed, casting doubts about the feasibility of parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled in 2018 and 2019.

## **People and Culture**

Four Afghan cricketers attracted strong bids in the Indian Premier League this month. Rashid Khan, the 19-year old spinner was the most valuable as Sunrisers Hyderabad got him for \$1.4 million. This is the highest bid for any Afghan sportsman to date. Khan is currently playing for the Strikers in the Australia Big Bash League.

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