



Afghanistan in February 2018

Peace

On the 28th, President Ghani hosted the international Kabul Process conference in Kabul and disclosed his plan for peace. Some view it as a last ditch attempt to bring the Taliban into a peace process. He said his offers do not have any preconditions but that the Taliban would have to recognise the Afghan government and the rule of law. In return, he pledged to recognise the Taliban as a legitimate political group; issue Afghan passports to their leaders; release Taliban prisoners; pay the way for their social and political participation; and agree to them opening an office in Afghanistan or in any other country not involved in the Afghan conflict.

The Taliban are yet to provide an official reaction to these offers. However, prior to the conference, on the 14th, they issued a rare "open letter" to the American people in which they called for ending the war through dialogue between them and the US government. They called the Afghan government a puppet regime and refused to talk to them directly. The Taliban warned that this call for peace should not be seen as a sign of weakness. Both the Afghan government and the Taliban claim they have the upper hand on the battlefield.

Politics

Time is ticking on the parliamentary elections scheduled for July this year. In an exceptional act of unity, on the 25th, representatives of major political parties issued a resolution in support of electoral reforms and called for the voting system to be changed from 'single non-transferable vote' to 'proportional representation'. In the former system, voters cast votes for individual candidates whilst in the latter they cast votes for party lists. Experts agree with political parties that proportional representation will create a more representative parliament. In response, the Independent Elections Commission said such changes are likely to delay the parliamentary elections even more. The Japanese embassy in Kabul announced on the 21st, that it would give \$13 million in aid for the electoral process.

On 4th, President Ghani signed the retirement orders of 162 military generals in accordance with a new retirement law. This is part of a reform process that will see the retirement of about 2,000 generals and high-ranking military officers by December this year.

Security

Following a deadly month, February was relatively calmer in Kabul. On the 6th, the government announced a new three-phased security plan for Kabul city, which focuses on improving surveillance on the roads connecting the city to suburb areas. Meanwhile, President Ghani sacked seven security officials including two generals over negligence to prevent last month's attack on the military base in Kabul. They will face trial.

That said, insurgents' attacks and infighting between them and the pro-government forces continued in several provinces. On the 24th, three Taliban attacks in Farah and Helmand killed at least 20 Afghan soldiers. On the 10th, local officials said four cricketers and civilians were killed by an explosion in a match in Nangarhar. No group took responsibility for the attack.

On the 9th, residents of Khost protested against the killing of seven members of the same family by pro-government militias, supported by the US. In another incident, in Helmand a Taliban infiltrator killed sixteen members of a militia force.

Rights

This month the 2017 UN report on civilian casualties was published. It notes that civilians continue to bear the brunt of war in Afghanistan. Based on the report a total of 10,453 civilian casualties (3,438 killed) were documented in 2017. Although this figure represents a decrease of 9% compared with 2016, the report highlights the high number of casualties caused by suicide bombings and other attacks using improvised explosive devices. The report attributes 65% of casualties to anti-

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government elements and 16% to pro-government forces. It notes that the share of civilian casualties from aerial operations has increased by 7% from last year. On the 26th, CEO Abdullah said they are working on the National Policy on Prevention and Mitigation of Civilian Harm. This will provide specific guidelines to prevent civilian casualties and damage to their property during military operations.

On the 17th, the International Criminal Court said Afghans have submitted 1.17 million statements in the three months since they began collecting materials for possible war crimes cases. The statements include accounts of atrocities not only by groups like the Taliban and Daesh, but also Afghan Security Forces and government-affiliated warlords, the US-led coalition, and foreign and domestic spy agencies.

On the 6th, the Ministry of Justice said they are concerned about the growing number of children and teenagers involved in security-related offenses. Currently about 780 such individuals are held in juvenile centres, 120 of whom have committed murder, and a few of them have been arrested before attempting suicide attacks.

On the 2nd, footage appeared in social media of a public lashing of Soraya, a 22-year-old woman living in the government controlled district of Takhar. She was punished by her in-laws for an alleged extramarital affair. Rights activists severely criticized the government's inaction. Soraya is now in Kabul demanding justice. In another incident on the 26th, in Samangan police arrested Nasrullah who confessed to killing his 27-year-old sister and a 58-year-old man as he suspected they had a sexual affair.

Humanitarian & Development

On the 23rd, the presidents of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Prime Minister of Pakistan and Indian Minister of State External Affairs attended the opening ceremony of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. This \$22.5 billion project will feed natural gas to the three countries from Turkmenistan. Afghanistan is expected to earn more than \$400 million in transit duties annually from the project. The line passes through restive provinces like Helmand and Kandahar. A Taliban spokesperson said they would protect the project as it will benefit the Afghan economy.

On the 1st, Pakistan extended the stay of registered Afghan refugees there for another 60 days. There is an estimated 2.38 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, about 1 million of whom are unregistered.

A new World Bank report said Afghan refugees contribute about 10% to the country's gross income. Based on the report 16% of Afghan families have at least one relative working abroad who sends money home. Many of those going abroad in search of work are undocumented and if the government can help them find work legally in places like Turkey and Gulf countries, they could play a greater role in the country's economy.

On the 11th, Iranian officials said they have licensed 164 Afghan firms to operate from Chabahar port and would facilitate their Kabul-Chabahar-Dubai flights to improve Afghan investors' access to global markets. Chabahar is the closest sea port to Afghanistan and is seen as an alternative to transit routes via Pakistan.

On the 22nd, Transparency International ranked Afghanistan as the 4th most corrupt country in the world, following only Syria, South Sudan and Somalia. This study that covers 180 countries ranked New Zealand and Denmark as the least corrupt.

The German children NGO Peace Village International sponsored 99 Afghan children patients to receive treatment in Germany. They range from as young as 11 months to 13-years-old and are mostly comprised of burn victims and orthopaedic patients.

The Afghan National Insurance Company, a state-run enterprise, has started a scheme to insure business properties and assets against suicide attacks. More than 200 shops were destroyed in last month's ambulance bombing in Kabul.

People and Culture

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) and its visionary founder Ahmad Sarmast along with American heavy metal band Metallica won the prestigious 2018 Polar Music Prize. This is to recognise how "this inspirational organization has used the power of music to transform young people's lives." The award which is also known as the Nobel Prize of music comes with a \$124,000 cash prize for each winner.

Rashid Khan, 19, became the youngest man to ever top the One Day International cricket ranking. After splendid performance in the Indian and Australian leagues, he helped Afghanistan win the series over Zimbabwe this month. On the 6th, it was known that he has accepted an offer to play for Sussex in the British T20 Blast in 2018.

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