



Afghanistan in March 2018

Peace

Insecurity in Helmand this month sparked an unprecedented call for peace from the province's citizens. On the 23rd, an unknown suicide attacker killed at least sixteen and injured more than thirty people who had gathered to watch a wrestling match in Lashkar Gah, the capital city of Helmand. Four members of one family were among the dead. This triggered a public sit-in at the site of carnage. Protesters included young and old men and women who called on warring sides to agree an immediate ceasefire. Under the banner of the Peoples' Movement for Peace, protesters planned to stage a peace march from Lashkar Gah to Musa Qala, a Taliban stronghold. The Taliban responded saying they should instead march to the Afghan government-controlled Shorabak base. After not receiving any support or response from the government, protestors started a hunger strike that lasted for three days. The strike was called off after religious scholars intervened and persuaded the protesters that self-harm is prohibited in Islam. The sit-in still continues.

On the 27th, Uzbekistan hosted the Tashkent international summit on peace in Afghanistan where leaders and diplomats from 23 countries took part. Regional countries including Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, Qatar and India agreed on a framework for putting an end to the war in Afghanistan. Among other commitments, they agreed on working together to stop the financial, material, and arms support to the Taliban and Daesh. Four days before the event, the American top general in Afghanistan accused Russia of supporting and even supplying arms to the Taliban.

The Taliban called on religious scholars to boycott an international peace conference of religious scholars from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia due to have been held in March in Indonesia. They said the event was merely intended to "legitimize the presence of infidel invaders in the Islamic country of Afghanistan".

On the 13th, American Defence Secretary Jim Mattis made an unannounced visit to Kabul to meet Afghan leaders. He said the US is seeing signs of interest from elements of the Taliban insurgency about talks with Kabul. He also praised President Ghani's recent peace offer to the Taliban. President Ghani called the new US strategy a "game changer" which allowed him to extend his peace offer from a position of power.

Politics

Putting an end to a three-month standoff, Atta Mohammad Noor agreed to step down as Governor of Balkh. He is replaced by his fellow Jamiat party member, Ishaq Rahgozar. It was reported that the agreement between President Ghani and Noor allowed Jamiat to choose a new police chief for Balkh Province, name a new education minister, and to choose an ambassador to a Central Asian nation.

On the 30th, the Independent Elections Commission announced that they would hold the parliamentary and district council elections on 20th October and that voter registration would start in mid-April. This is more than three years later than the original date, as per the Constitution.

Security

Despite the peace offer made by President Ghani last month, Afghan forces and the Taliban engaged in fierce battles in various parts of the country. On the 10th, a Taliban attack on Afghan security forces in Farah resulted in the death of at least 24 members of the Afghan forces. A subsequent air strike on the Taliban killed at least 24 of their fighters.

On the 9th, a Daesh suicide bomber killed at least ten and wounded 22 people during a Hazara Shia gathering in Kabul. On the 21st, another Daesh attack on a Hazara gathering celebrating the Afghan New Year, or *Nowruz*, took at least 31 lives and injured dozens others.

On the 7th, an American drone strike in Kunar killed more than 20 Pakistani Taliban. On the same day, an explosion killed the provincial director of Nangarhar's Hajj and Religious Affairs department, Mohammad Zahir Haqqani.

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On the 7th, the German government approved plans to raise the number of German troops deployed in Afghanistan by one-third to 1,300. German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen said the military's mission in Afghanistan would likely extend for some time and that "We need patience and a long breath, without question." She travelled to Afghanistan on the 26th.

Earlier in the month, Afghan forces captured a German citizen during a raid on the Taliban in Helmand. The German man was thought to have supported the Taliban for over eight years. On the 23rd, Afghan forces captured a French female Daesh fighter in Jawzjan.

Rights

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission released its annual report on violence against women in Afghanistan. They documented over 4,000 cases of violence against women from March 2017 – March 2018, which shows an increase of 11.7% over the same period last year. This includes 277 cases of murder, 136 of which were honour killings.

On the 28th, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' annual report on Afghanistan said that despite efforts to improve the situation in Afghanistan, human rights remains elusive. A key concern highlighted in the report is the high number of civilian casualties in the country. The report states, "Civic space remained subject to enormous constraints. Civil society actors, including human rights defenders, specifically women human rights defenders and activists, and journalists faced threats, acts of intimidation and harassment and, at times, deadly attacks".

On the 28th, Massoud Hossaini, a Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist, escaped unscathed from an attack by unknown gunmen. The reason behind the attack is still a mystery but Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous places for journalists.

Humanitarian & Development

On the 12th, CEO Abdullah said aid workers have made enormous sacrifices and played a critical role in helping to rebuild the country. He was speaking at the closing ceremony of the national NGO conference. A day earlier, President Ghani also commended national and international charities but also called on them to work more closely with the government.

A water dispute between residents of two villages in Ghazni in the first week of March heightened tensions in the province, and resulted in the death of eighteen people and the kidnapping of fourteen others from both villages. On the 5th, protesters blocked the Kabul-Kandahar highway for several days and demanded justice from the central government in relation to the dispute and the killings.

People and Culture

Jahantab Ahmadi, a 25-year-old mother became a national role model after her photo went viral. She was photographed taking a university entrance exam while sitting on the ground and nursing her two-month-old baby. She had walked ten hours to attend the exam. A crowdfunding campaign launched by the Afghan Youth Association to help pay for her university fees has raised more than \$14,000.

On the 25th, Afghanistan snatched the Cricket World Cup Qualifier 2018 title. After coming close to being eliminated in the first stage of the tournament, Afghanistan completed a fairy-tale turnaround and beat the West Indies in the final match. The Cricket World Cup will be held in the UK in 2019.

On the 8th, Artlords, a volunteer group of artists, painted a mural of slain Hamida Barmaki on the wall close to a Hizb-e-Islami leader's house in Kabul. Mrs. Barmaki who was a university lecturer was killed in a Hizb-e-Islami suicide bombing six years ago. The mural was painted to mark International Women's Day and to reflect war crimes against women in the country. A few days later unknown men defaced the mural.

On the 21st, Afghans celebrated Nowruz, the first day of spring which marks the New Year. Campaigners and religious scholars called to boycott this "un-Islamic" tradition, a move which prompted an outpour of anger at the growth of Islamic conservatism in society. The Taliban had officially banned Nowruz during their rule from 1996-2001.

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