



Afghanistan in May 2018

Peace

On the 14th, a Helmand peace convoy began its journey to Kabul by foot. They were warmly welcomed by residents in Qandahar and Zabul and some joined them. The convoy's main demand is an immediate ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

On the 11th, religious scholars from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia issued a declaration to support efforts for peace in Afghanistan and to oppose "terrorism and violent extremism". They were attending a conference arranged by the Indonesian government. Mawlawi Anwarulhaq Haqqani, a Pakistani scholar who attended the conference, later said that he represented the interests of the Taliban and prevented any direct reference to them in the conference's declaration. He also said that the conference did not discuss any ceasefire, hinting that the Taliban's Jihad should continue in Afghanistan.

General John Nicholson, the US commander in Afghanistan, said on the 31st, that the Taliban have held secret meetings with Afghan officials to discuss a ceasefire. He added that the talks also involved foreign governments and international organisations. However, the Taliban has rejected this as a "false claim".

Politics

On the 10th, the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) extended the voter registration process for 30 days. By the 28th, over four million of the target 15 million voters had registered. This low rate is mainly because of insecurity. On the 10th, the UN said that since last month, 23 election-related incidents had killed and injured 271 civilians. On the 3rd, President Ghani launched the electronic national ID card system. CEO Abdullah opposed it and called it a unilateral decision on a matter that needs national consensus.

The low number of voters registered has forced the IEC to ponder over creative solutions such as voters having a copy of ID cards stamped instead of using the originals for voting. This was allegedly pushed by the President's office. In a televised interview, Muazullah Dowlati, the IEC deputy head said, President Ghani warned the commissioners either to agree on using the copy IDs or resign from their positions. On the 16th, the IEC scrapped this plan to prevent fraud. On the 26th, the IEC launched the process for candidates to register for the parliamentary and district council elections.

Security

Violence continued in the country as insurgent groups attacked more district and provincial centres. On the 27th, Afghan security officials said they are engaged in battles with insurgents in seven provinces. On the 15th, Taliban attacked the city of Farah and took it under their control for one day. They killed 25 members of the Afghan security forces and five civilians. Farah city has come under repeated attack from the Taliban in recent years, and it nearly fell to a determined assault in October 2016. Two days after Farah's recapture by Afghan forces, three Taliban suicide attackers hit the city. Officials say they are hiding in civilian houses.

Local officials in Farah have placed the blame on support for the insurgents from Iran, which borders the province. On the 22nd, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Iran of supporting the Taliban with weapons and funding.

On the 3rd, the Taliban captured Badakhshan's Kohistan district and held it under their control for three days. On the 20th, Taliban fighters closed in on another district in Afghanistan besieging the governor's compound in Ajrestan district in Ghazni. Officials said reinforcements had arrived and were relieving police defending the town. On the 8th, Taliban militants attacked a police base in Faryab, killing or wounding 25 police officers and kidnapping 31.

Attacks on public buildings have continued too. On the 13th, at least nine people were killed and over 30 wounded after unknown gunmen attacked Jalalabad's customs finance department. On the 30th, an attack on Interior Ministry in Kabul resulted in the death of ten insurgents and one policeman. On the 18th, four explosions in a cricket stadium in Jalalabad

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city killed at least eight civilians and wounded 55 others. People had gathered after evening prayers at the start of the holy month of Ramadan to watch a match between two local teams.

On the 6th, at least 17 people were killed and 37 wounded in an explosion at a mosque in Khost. The mosque was also being used as a voter registration centre. On the 22nd a vehicle full of explosives detonated in Kandahar as police were trying to defuse it, killing at least 16 people.

On the 24th, the US military said they attacked the meeting place of Taliban leaders in Musa Qala killing at least 50 Taliban insurgents, including their deputy shadow governor. In the same province, on the 31st, Afghan Special Forces freed more than 100 prisoners held by the Taliban, including women and children.

On the 18th, the UK government said it was considering doubling the number of troops deployed to Afghanistan in response to a request from President Trump for reinforcements in the face of increasing gains by the Taliban. Britain has about 600 troops in Afghanistan at present, mainly based in Kabul, training officers, and not engaged in combat. There is also a small contingent of Special Forces.

Rights

On the 7th, the UN reported that at least 30 children and six adults were killed and 51 injured in an Afghan air strike last month in Kunduz. The government said after the strike on 2nd April that its air force had targeted a gathering of senior Taliban figures. On the 16th, President Ghani met the families of the victims and apologised.

On the 29th, a UN report found that authorities deny Afghan women justice by routinely referring serious criminal cases to traditional mediation councils that fail to protect victims. The report is based on 237 cases of violence against women and 280 cases of murder in 2016 and 2017. Just 18% of cases had ended in convictions and a prison sentence.

Humanitarian & Development

A survey co-conducted by Afghanistan's Central Statistics Organization shows that almost 54% of the country's 15 million people live below the poverty line. The survey was carried out two years ago and the percentage of those living below the poverty line is now likely to be higher. It also stated that the country's economy is expected to grow by only 2.5% in 2018 and 2019 due to the challenging security and political situation in the country. President Ghani called the poverty rate "shameful".

On the 17th, heavy rainfall caused widespread flooding in Badakhshan, killing at least seven people and destroying at least 100 houses. Three days of flooding in Balkh's Kholm district killed at least nine people, on the 18th. Meanwhile, drought has forced about 180 families in Ghor, Badghis and Faryab to seek refuge in Herat. The UN says the ongoing drought has gripped two-thirds of the country and has left more than 2 million people at risk of severe food insecurity.

A recent UN survey states that last year drugs from Afghanistan smuggled and sold abroad totalled an estimated \$7.5 billion. On the 26th, the Interior Ministry officials said they have arrested over 700 drug smugglers in the past two months and on average they seize one ton of drugs every day. The UN believes factors such as political instability, a rise in security threats and unemployment are forcing farmers to report to cultivating poppies.

On the 22nd, an advocacy group Global Witness reported that Daesh fighters are making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year from illegal mining of talc, much of which ends up in the United States and Europe. Illegal mining of gemstones and minerals such as lapis lazuli is a major source of revenue for Taliban and Daesh insurgents.

People and Culture

On the 3rd, 82 couples tied the knot in a rare mass wedding in Helmand. This was to save exorbitant wedding costs and harmful practices such as the bride price, which can be as high as \$12,000. The event was arranged by a charity.

On the 17th, tribal leaders in Musa Khail district in Khost decided that education for girls should be made compulsory. Families not agreeing with this will be fined 5,000 Afghanis (\$70). "If we send our daughters and girls to school, we will not face a shortage of women doctors and healthcare officials. An educated girl will help educate a whole family," said Gul Mohammad Khan, a tribal elder.

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