



Afghanistan in June 2018

Peace

For the first time in the nearly seventeen years of the Taliban's war against the Afghan government, Afghans experienced a taste of peace on 15-17 June. Initially, President Ghani announced a seven-day unilateral ceasefire with the Taliban (but not with Daesh and other foreign fighters) to mark Eid celebrations. This was in response to a request by Islamic clerics. Two days later, the Taliban also declared a three-day ceasefire limited to government forces (not international troops).

During the ceasefire, Taliban fighters re-entered many cities, openly took part in Eid celebrations, mingled with the population, greeted Afghan forces, and spoke with the media. Afghan social media was awash with photos and stories of the truce. The calm was however interrupted by Daesh attacks, most notably the one in Nangarhar on the 16th which killed at least 26 people. Because of the widespread public support to the ceasefire, President Ghani extended it for another 10 days, an action not reciprocated by the Taliban.

On the 18th, peace marchers from Helmand arrived in Kabul after walking for 37 days. The marchers included teachers, students, and war victims on crutches (and one in a wheelchair). Along their 700km journey, they had met people in both government and Taliban controlled areas who were all tired of the war. President Ghani visited them in their sit-in location and listened to their demands, which include a one-year ceasefire, starting peace talks with the Taliban and achieving a political settlement with them. They also held a sit-in in front of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the American Embassy. Another group from Kunar joined them after their 6-day journey.

The Taliban leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada in his Eid message emphasised his desire for direct negotiation with the US government and refusal to recognise the "puppet" regime in Kabul. The Taliban also dismissed the Helmand peace march as a "conspiracy" which has been fabricated by the United States and implemented by the High Peace Council.

Politics

On the 30th, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) said that it had received the applications of 2,691 candidates for parliamentary elections, 404 of whom are female. They will stand in 34 provinces for 249 seats. In contrast, the district council elections have received little interest. By 12th, only 3,058 candidates had registered for 2,800 district council seats. In some conflict affected districts, there are no candidates. In addition to insecurity, a lack of clear roles and responsibilities for district councils causes this lack of enthusiasm.

The IEC on the 27th decided to divide Ghazni province into three constituencies to address the lack of representation for those who are within the Taliban controlled areas. In 2010, all eleven members of parliament came from Hazara ethnic groups who live in government controlled areas. Critics consider this change illegal and discriminatory as all the other 33 provinces have one constituency, and that lack of a census means that dividing the constituencies would be almost arbitrary. A parliamentary debate on this topic went awry as some parliamentarians verbally and physically attacked Latif Pedram, an MP, who spoke against this decision.

Security

Violence continued in the country despite the fasting month of Ramadan and the ceasefire. On the 11th, a Daesh suicide bomber killed seventeen people and wounded more 25 during rush hour at the entrance to Afghanistan's Rural Rehabilitation and Development ministry in Kabul as workers were leaving for home. On the 12th, Taliban fighters captured Faryab's Kohistan district, killing the governor and tens of security forces.

On the 20th, three days after the end of the Taliban's ceasefire, the group killed 30 Afghan soldiers and captured a military base in Badghis. On the 24th, they stormed at least thirteen security check posts in Wardak and made off with military hardware, weapons, and ammunition. Ghazni parliamentarians reported that the Taliban have made plans to attack hitherto secure parts of the province.

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On the 15th, President Ghani confirmed the death of Pakistani Taliban leader Mullah Fazlullah in a drone operation in Kunar near Pakistani border. He hopes this operation will improve trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Rights

On the 3rd, a UN report said that nearly half of all Afghan children aged between seven and seventeen years old (3.7 million) are missing out on school because of worsening security, poverty, and discrimination against girls. In the worse-affected provinces – including Kandahar, Helmand, Wardak, Paktika, Zabul and Uruzgan – up to 85% of girls are not attending school. Other reasons noted are displacement, child marriage, shortage of female teachers, and poor school facilities. "There's an education crisis in Afghanistan right now - with girls most affected - and the world is looking away," said Heather Barr of Human Rights Watch, an independent watchdog.

On 19th, the eve of World Refugee Day, Minister Balkhi of the Ministry for Refugees and Repatriation said that since the beginning of 2018, a total of 955 Afghan migrants have returned home voluntarily from Europe and another 246 were deported. In total 332,453 Afghans returned from all over the world during this period. According to him, there are more than six million Afghans refugees around the world.

An investigation found that Australian troops in 2009 killed an Afghan amputee in Uruzgan and kept his prosthetic leg as a souvenir, which they took back to Perth and drank beer from. The man's death is one of several alleged war crimes committed by a rogue Special Air Service Regiment team deployed to Afghanistan. Details of the killings emerged as Australia's prime minister condemned troops from the same elite squadron who were photographed flying a Nazi flag from a vehicle while on patrol in Afghanistan.

Humanitarian & Development

On the 19th, officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock said they are facing a critical shortage of fodder for animals across the country because of the ongoing drought. They say that the drought has had a devastating effect on at least 66 percent of all livestock. They estimate that the country has over 20 million goats and sheep which are worth about \$7 billion.

On the 22nd, unknown gunmen in Kandahar abducted 43 staff members of a local construction company that worked to build the Spin Boldak-Shorabak road. Last month, seven Indian engineers and an Afghan national working for a power plant were kidnapped in Baghlan, prompting several private international companies to reduce their presence in Afghanistan.

On the same day, it was reported that the Taliban changed the school curricula in areas under their control. In Logar, they have removed art and culture subjects to give more time for the study of subjects such as the life of the Prophet Mohammad and the Quran. They only allow girls to attend schools before they hit puberty.

It was reported that, in contrast to the global trend, suicide rates among women in Afghanistan are very high. According to the Afghan Human Rights Commission, about 3,000 Afghans attempt to take their lives every year. In Herat, which accounted for more than the half of all cases nationwide last year, 1,300 of suicide attempts were made by women. Experts think such high female suicide rates are because of a range of mental health problems and domestic violence.

People and Culture

On the 14th, King Carl Gustaf XVI of Sweden handed the 2018 Polar Music Prize to the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) and Dr Ahmad Sarmast, its founder and director, and the heavy metal band Metallica. This was to recognise the inspirational role that ANIM has played in using the power of music to transform young people's lives. The winners received a cash prize of 1 million kronor (\$124,000) each. Metallica donated part of their cash prize to ANIM.

Breshna Musazai, 28, who is called Afghanistan's Malala, graduated with honours in law from American University of Afghanistan. Two years ago, as she was making her way to evening prayers, Breshna was left to die by Taliban assailants after being shot in the leg and foot. Breshna was already paralysed by polio in one leg. In a country where women even without physical disabilities face so many problems Breshna's story is remarkable.

On the 29th, Bamiyan hosted the Dambora Festival, a two-day annual music event, to strengthen local tourism and culture. More than 20,000 people from various provinces came to watch male and female artists perform. The Bamiyan Governor said that last year Bamiyan attracted more than 300,000 local and international tourists.

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