



## Afghanistan in July & August 2018

### Peace and Politics

Despite the euphoria following June's holiday truce between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the conflict intensified in July and August. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, President Ghani announced a three-month conditional ceasefire on the occasion of Eid-ul Adha. The Taliban rejected the offer on the grounds that it would pro-long the "occupation" in Afghanistan. Their goodwill gesture to release hundreds of Afghan government prisoners during Eid was overshadowed by their kidnapping of around 200 passengers in Kunduz. The Taliban said they carried out the abductions to investigate the presence of Afghan security forces among civilian passengers.

In August, the Taliban held direct talks with US officials in Qatar, for the first time during Trump's presidency. Chief Executive Abdullah said the Afghan Government is aware of these meetings. However, critics say such talks de-legitimises the Afghan Government. On the 21<sup>st</sup> August, the Afghan Government reacted harshly to the Russian initiative to hold a peace conference in Moscow, after a Taliban spokesperson said the group would be sending a delegation too. The Moscow meeting was postponed following a call between President Ashraf Ghani and Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

The electoral process continued albeit with some hiccups. In August the Electoral Complaints Commission barred 35 candidates, including some of the lawmakers, from standing in the parliamentary elections because of suspected links to illegal armed groups. Chief among them were Fawzia Koofi, a prominent female parliamentarian and her sister. Other notable ones were Ziaulhaq Amarkhail, the former head of the Independent Elections Commission (IEC); and Zardad Faryadi, a warlord convicted by British courts for committing crimes against humanity. The rejected candidates said this decision was politically motivated; and organised protests that resulted in the closure of the IEC offices for more than two weeks in several cities including Kabul. The offices have now resumed operations.

The Independent Elections Commission (IEC) announced 20<sup>th</sup> of April 2019 as the date for the next Presidential Elections.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, the self-exiled First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum returned to Kabul from Turkey after more than a year. His return put an end to the violent protests in several provinces against the detention and torture of one of his allied militia leaders. He travelled to Turkey after the launch of an investigation into him sexually assaulting Ahmad Ishchi, a political opponent.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, Mohammad Hanif Atmar stepped down as National Security Advisor. Atmar has been a long standing ally of the President and was considered one of the most powerful men in the country. He was replaced by Hamdullah Mohib, the Afghan Ambassador to the United States. The resignations put forward by other cabinet members were rejected. The ministers for defence and interior also announced their resignations following a Daesh attack on Eid proceedings in the Presidential Palace, but President Ghani rejected their resignations.

### Security

July and August marked two of the bloodiest months of this fighting season. Several attacks targeted civilian and military targets in Jalalabad, Kunduz, Kabul, Paktia, Ghazni and other provinces. Increasing targeting of Afghan civilians in the war has raised the concern of the UN which said that civilian deaths reached a "record high" in the first half of this year. With 5,122 civilian casualties (1,692 deaths and 3,430 injured) between January and June 2018, civilian deaths are up by one per cent, the highest ever recorded by the UN since they began recording the figures in 2009. The UN attributed 67 per cent of all civilian casualties to Anti-Government Elements, with 42 per cent attributed to the Taliban, 18 per cent to Daesh, and seven per cent to unidentified others. Pro-government forces were held responsible for 21 per cent of civilian casualties.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, the Taliban attacked the city of Ghazni and took it under their control for four days, killing at least 20 civilians and 100 security forces. Ghazni is the closest city to the Kabul capital they have captured since they were removed from power in 2001. The siege of Ghazni left hundreds of thousands in the city without water, food and electricity. It also spread unprecedented fear among residents of the capital as all communications with Ghazni were cut off for a week. Following the Taliban's withdrawal from Ghazni, the Afghan government was criticised over its inability to provide security to major population centres.

*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.*

The UN also reported a surge in suicide attacks claimed by Daesh. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, a suicide bomber killed 19 Sikhs in Jalalabad, including Avtar Singh, the only Sikh candidate for parliamentary elections. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, a bomb and gun attack killed at least 15 people in the same city. Several higher education institutes were forced to shut down following threats by Daesh. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, a Daesh suicide bomber attacked an education centre in Kabul attended by Hazara Shias, killing 40 and injuring 67 mostly young women and men. The Norwegian Refugee Council said “education is increasingly a casualty in Afghanistan”.

In return, Daesh also underwent attacks by Government and Taliban forces. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, more than 200 Daesh fighters surrendered to Afghan security forces following severe fighting between the Taliban and Daesh fighters in Jawzjan. A Taliban spokesman claimed to have freed all Northern provinces from Daesh presence. Afghanistan told the US that the fighters will be treated as prisoners of war. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, a drone strike in Nangarhar killed Abu Sayed Orakzai, the purported Daesh leader in Afghanistan, along with nine of his fighters.

## **Rights**

On 8<sup>th</sup> of July, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) said that over 85% of Afghan women and children face some kind of harassment. The Commission said that several women are forced to give up their jobs while others have to give in to the illegal demands of their male colleagues to keep their jobs. Rights activists petitioned the parliament in early July to ask for full implementation of the anti-harassment law, which was signed off by the President in April 2018.

Marie Stopes Afghanistan, a charity, said a breakthrough has been made in the fight against virginity testing in the country. A new public health policy will stop clinics and hospitals from performing the testing. Efforts are being made to promote the policy in both government and Taliban areas. Despite the ban on virginity testing in 2016, the examinations are still often performed resulting in the imprisonment of several girls and women.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, the Pakistani Government granted a further three month extension to the proof of registration cards of Afghan refugees living in the country, preventing their mass forced repatriation. This follows three previous extensions to the deadline after last year’s announcement that all Afghan refugees in Pakistan would be repatriated.

## **Humanitarian & Development**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of July, NGOs reported that the below average precipitation since October 2017 has degraded agriculture and livelihoods in the country. The situation of people displaced by the drought is said to be extremely serious. Man-made disasters drove displacement too. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of August, the UN said that more than 21,000 people were displaced from their homes after the Taliban attacked the Ghazni city. The Afghan Red Crescent Society and the World Food Program have distributed food packages to several families and people affected by the conflict.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of August, UNICEF said that over 600,000 children in Afghanistan suffer from acute malnutrition. Afghanistan has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world. The Government of Japan announced \$8.1 million in financial assistance within the structure of UNICEF to scale up maternal and child health care in Afghanistan. This will help 3.1 million children in the country.

Officials from the British embassy in Kabul and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced \$105 million funds to help the education of unprivileged girls in Afghanistan. The funding is part of the Girls Education Challenge program.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, the Independent Civil Aviation Authority of Afghanistan assumed full control of Afghanistan's airspace after almost 26 years.

## **People & Culture**

Afghan filmmaker Roya Sadat won the Interfilm Academy’s One Future Prize at the 36<sup>th</sup> International Munich Film Festival. Her “superbly directed” movie, *A Letter to the President* depicts a country of contradictions in the Afghan legal system and tackles the issue of inequality of men and women.

On 10<sup>th</sup> of August, 24-year-old Hahifa Yousoufi pushed alpine climbing forward in Afghanistan in a big way, as she became the first Afghan woman to summit her country’s highest peak, the 7,492 meters Mt. Noshag. Noshag is the second highest mountain in the Hindu Kush. Yousoufi said, “I did this for every single girl. The girls of Afghanistan are strong and will continue to be strong.” Prior to Yousoufi only two other Afghan men have ever climbed and reached the summit.

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