



Afghanistan in November 2018

Peace & Politics

President Ashraf Ghani announced an updated peace plan at the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan, co-hosted by the Afghan government and the UN on 27-28 of November. “We seek a peace agreement in which the Afghan Taliban would be included in a democratic and inclusive society,” Ghani said. He said he does not have any pre-conditions for peace talks to start, however, he said that the Taliban should either accept or propose amendments to the Constitution. He also announced the formation of a 12-member Afghan negotiation team headed by his Chief of Staff. To create consensus at home, he also spoke about the formation of a broad and diverse peace advisory committee. He advised that his plan may take five years to complete.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who was also present at the conference, said that his country would do its best to encourage the Taliban to enter into peace negotiations. He also warned that peace efforts would depend on political stability during the Presidential elections next year and the capabilities of the Afghan armed forces on the ground. Earlier on the 9th, Lavrov hosted a meeting in Moscow, where for the first time Taliban representatives met envoys of eleven countries and members of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC). A Taliban representative stressed that the first step to bringing peace in Afghanistan is the withdrawal of American forces from the country. Meanwhile, the US started a second round of talks which included four days of meetings with the Taliban delegation in Doha. According to a HPC official, US Special Envoy Khalilzad is under a six-month deadline given to him by President Trump to broker peace with the Taliban.

The Independent Elections Commission (IEC) said they would delay announcing the results of the October parliamentary elections until December. The delay has been caused by thousands of complaints filed about alleged wrongdoings by candidates and electoral staff and by the IEC’s decision to recount votes in eleven provinces, including Kabul.

Security

The conflict continued to cause many civilian and military casualties in November, most notably in Faryab, Helmand and Ghazni. On the 7th, the Taliban carried out a series of attacks in the central highlands - mainly in Khas Urozgan, Jaghori and Malistan districts. The central highlands had been the safest region of the country inhabited mostly by Shi’ite Hazaras. In about four days, the violence claimed the lives of at least 50 Afghan military forces and civilians. The government sent reinforcement troops after four days and vowed to establish permanent military posts in the area. The UN reported that the clashes displaced thousands of families to Ghazni, Bamiyan, Maidan-Wardak and Kabul, joining the 21,000 people already forcibly displaced in August by the four-day Taliban offensive in Ghazni.

On the 25th and 26th, thousands of Afghans gathered in Kabul, Bamiyan and Mazar to protest and demand the release of Commander Alipoor, a Hazara anti-Taliban militia leader who is accused of human rights abuses by the government. Demonstrations turned violent and injured at least 23 policemen in Kabul alone. After two days of demonstrations the government decided to release him on bail.

Only hours after President Ghani’s announcement of a plan for peace negotiations on the 28th, Taliban gunmen attacked a British security contractor compound in Kabul killing 10 and wounding at least 35. A Taliban spokesman said that the attack was a response to casualties caused by security forces in Kandahar and Helmand, where airstrikes targeting Taliban fighters killed 23 civilians and 16 Taliban militants.

Attacks from Daesh also continued in Khost and Kabul. On the 20th, a suicide blast targeted religious scholars in Kabul who had gathered to mark the birthday of the Prophet Mohammad. The attack killed 55 scholars and injured more than 90. Only

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three days later, another suicide bomber targeted a mosque in an army base in Khost, killing at least 26 Afghan security forces.

For the first time since the end of the US combat mission, the Afghan government released official estimates of the casualties of Afghan security forces. According to President Ghani, since 2015, the conflict has killed more than 28,000 from the police and army ranks.

Humanitarian & Development

Afghanistan's development and humanitarian situation was discussed substantially during the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan. At the end of the two-day conference, donors and the Afghan government agreed on the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework, a review of the 2015 Self-reliance Mutual Accountability Framework. On the 27th, the European Union announced \$535 million in financial aid for Afghanistan to go towards reforms in the public sector, health, justice and migration issues.

The drought continued to affect almost 6.2 million people in rural Afghanistan. Out of these, 3.9 million are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance in 22 provinces. This month, the UN said predictions for the upcoming wet season are encouraging, with a 65% likelihood of average to above-average precipitation until May 2019. This means conditions should be favourable for winter wheat production.

The drought has also influenced opium poppy crops in northern and western Afghanistan, where a sharp decrease in production was recorded in 2018. A new UN Afghanistan Opium Survey shows an encouraging decrease in opium poppy cultivation by 20% this year. According to the survey, the total cultivation area in Afghanistan was estimated to be 263,000 hectares in 2018, compared to 328,000 last year. However, the current level is still the second highest level recorded and exceeds levels in 2014 by 17%.

On the 16th after three years of talks, the Afghan government signed an agreement with five nations creating the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, a trade route connecting Afghanistan with Europe. The agreement aims at ensuring greater connectivity and increasing trade across Eurasia, while decreasing transit dependency. The corridor will connect Faryab and Herat provinces and run through Turkmenistan, the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, and to Georgia. From there, it will connect to Turkey and Europe.

On the 22nd, The Asian Development Bank (ADB) signed a new memorandum of understanding for several energy projects throughout Afghanistan. The projects aim at enhancing energy security and strengthening energy trade. ADB is Afghanistan's main partner in the energy sector, with a total investment of \$2.2 billion.

The World Bank's Doing Business 2019 report, which measures business regulations across 190 countries, declared Afghanistan is one of the top ten improvers in doing business alongside China, India, Azerbaijan, and Djibouti. Afghanistan climbed sixteen positions in the rankings from last year, advancing from 183rd in 2018 to 167th in the 2019 report.

Rights

A new report from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, an international NGO, states the number of attacks on education centres in Afghanistan in 2018 is one of the highest since 2011. In the first half of 2018, the number of UN verified attacks on education centres in Afghanistan almost doubled compared to last year, and at least 112 cases of election-related violence affected schools. The charity also expressed concern over the sharp increase in the number of out-of-school children this year, particularly girls. About 3.7 million school aged children - of these 2.2 million girls - are out of school across Afghanistan.

People and culture

On the 7th, Safiya Wazir, a Democrat and 27 year-old mother of two, became the first former refugee to win a seat in New Hampshire's House of Representative elections. At age six, Wazir and her family fled to Uzbekistan from Taliban's persecution in Baghlan. She arrived in the US at age 16 and only five years after getting American citizenship defeated the Republican candidate running against her.

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