



Afghanistan in December 2018

Peace

December was another month of ups and downs for peace efforts. To shore up political support at home, on the 11th, President Ghani formed the High Advisory Board for Peace. This 24-member board is comprised of key government leaders and Mujahidin politicians. Habiba Sarabi a member of the High Peace Council, another government body, criticised the Board for its lack of female and minority representation. On the 15th, the Afghan government held talks with Pakistan and China to get their support in bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table. The three countries also signed a counter-terrorism memorandum.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Envoy for peace in Afghanistan, continued to engage with the Taliban and Pakistan. On the 15th, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said they would soon host a meeting between US and Taliban representatives. This was apparently in response to a letter by President Donald Trump sent last month in which Pakistan was requested to fully support American efforts in advancing the Afghan peace process. On the 17th, Khalilzad met the Taliban delegation in the United Arab Emirates, during which the Taliban reconfirmed their position that they would not deal directly with the Afghan government. They are however keen to reach an agreement with the US to put an end to 'the American occupation of Afghanistan'. On the 31st, Tehran said they have held direct meetings with Taliban representatives and that the Afghan government has been kept fully informed of their efforts.

Politics

Rifts between the two electoral bodies namely the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC) emerged over how to address electoral fraud. The IECC caused a stir by invalidating the Kabul parliamentary results, the most populous province of the country, and dismissed many IEC officials. The IEC claimed these decisions were politically motivated. So far the preliminary results of 30 out of 33 provinces have been announced. Ghazni is the only province where parliamentary elections did not take place because of security and political issues.

The IEC announced that next year's Presidential Elections will be held on 20th July instead of 20th April. The delay is to ensure that the lessons from the parliamentary elections are taken on board for the presidential election process.

On the 23rd, President Ghani appointed new ministers to the ministries of interior and defence. Amrullah Saleh (interior) Assadullah Khalid (defence) have both served as heads of the intelligence services. Political commentators say the reshuffling is in preparation for next year's elections. Human Rights Watch, an independent watchdog, criticised the appointment of Khalid, who they accuse of human rights violations.

Security

Conflict continued to claim victims in many provinces. On the 11th, at least ten police officers were killed and twelve others wounded in Kunduz when an elite Taliban force known as the Red Unit attacked fifteen security outposts in the Chardara District. The attacks raised concerns that the Taliban are in possession of modern arms. On the 2nd, insurgents abducted at least 40 passengers and drivers in Samangan province. The incident marked the second abduction in the province in less than a week. The abductees have not yet been released.

On the 24th, a suicide car bomb and gunmen attacked a government building in Kabul killing at least 43 and injuring twelve. The attack was carried out in an area hosting offices of the Afghan Ministry of Public Works and the National Authority for People with Disabilities and Martyrs' Families. Some 300 employees were trapped inside the buildings, during the six-hour battle. No group took responsibility for the attack, though both the Taliban and Daesh have conducted similar attacks in the past.

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On the 1st, An American airstrike killed Mullah Abdul Manan Akhund, the Taliban "shadow governor" of Helmand, and brother of Taliban founder Mullah Omar. The Taliban said his death was a major loss, but it would not deter them in their efforts to continue their holy war. Airstrikes have been criticised for increasing civilian casualties. On the 14th, local officials said that at least 20 civilians, including women and children, were killed in an airstrike targeting a Taliban commander in Kunar. A NATO spokeswoman in Afghanistan denied that there were civilian deaths. However, she said some civilians were wounded because the Taliban used civilians as shields while engaging the Afghan forces.

On the 20th, reports emerged about President Donald Trump's mulling over the idea to withdraw more than 5,000 of the 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan. The Afghan government expressed their indifference whilst some of the NATO allies expressed their concern about the impact the withdrawal may have on regional and global security. On the contrary, the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs said this would be a positive step and would help the peace process.

According to the Global Index for Terrorism, Afghanistan became the world's deadliest country for terrorism, overtaking Iraq. A quarter of all terrorism related deaths in 2017 occurred in Afghanistan mainly due to the surge in Daesh and Taliban attacks, according to the report.

Humanitarian & Development

The UN raised concerns about the impact of conflict on children. Its new report says that some 5,000 children were killed or maimed within the first three quarters of 2018. This is equal to all of 2017. Children make up 89% of civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war.

According to the International Labour Organisation, Afghanistan has the highest number of unemployed people in the world, with a rate of 30%. Afghan government statistics indicate about 400,000 new people enter the workforce and market every year. High unemployment rates also have a negative impact on security.

A survey from Integrity Watch Afghanistan, a charity, shows Afghanistan's legal, judicial and educational institutions remain the 'most corrupt' among the Afghan government institutions. According to the charity, 14% of surveyed Afghans said the judicial and legal institutions are the most corrupt, 10% educational institutions, and 9% said it is the attorney general's office. According to their data, the overall amount of money lost to corruption in Afghanistan in 2018 is estimated to be \$1.7 billion.

Rights

In December, FIFA, the world's football governing body, suspended members of Afghanistan's football federation indefinitely following allegations that officials sexually abused female players. Former Afghanistan national team football player Khalida Popal who now lives abroad accused the president of the Afghanistan Football Federation and other male officials running women's sports teams of sexual abuses. These types of accusations are not new in Afghanistan. In 2016, the head coach of the national cycling team was accused of repeatedly forcing its members to marry him and then divorcing them.

On the 17th, the UN launched a national referral mechanism and online database to help counteract human trafficking in the country. The measures aim at helping the Afghan government strengthen protection measures and law enforcement. In January 2017, the government amended laws following a sharp increase in human trafficking including forced labour and marriage, and sex work. According to the International Organization for Migration, human trafficking particularly affects women and children. High numbers of female victims are smuggled from neighbouring countries, most notably Pakistan.

People & Culture

Afghans continued to impress in sports. The National Wheelchair Basketball Team won the Hanna Lahoud International Wheelchair Basketball Tournament in Lebanon after defeating Syria in the final match. The Afghan team ended the tournament without losing a single game.

A new survey from the Asia Foundation, a charity, shows a 5.5% increase since 2009 in female contribution to household income. According to the charity, 19.1% of surveyed Afghans confirmed women contribute to household income and it is more likely in rural than urban areas. The proportion falls to 14.8% in areas controlled by non-government armed groups.

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