



Afghanistan in January 2019

Peace

January saw a growing momentum in American diplomatic efforts for peace amid growing scepticism. US Special Envoy for peace in Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad held a six-day meeting with Taliban delegates in Doha, which resulted in a draft framework for a peace deal between the US and the Taliban. The framework reportedly contains agreements on the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan (the key demand from the Taliban) and assurances that Afghanistan will not be used by international terror groups such as al-Qaeda (the key US demand). The disagreements that need to be ironed out are when and how the Taliban will start talking to the Afghan Government and agree on a comprehensive ceasefire.

In a press interview after the talks, Ambassador Khalilzad said that the all agreements made in the framework are conditional on a ceasefire and that talks also involve the Afghan government. “Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and “everything” must include an intra-Afghan dialogues and comprehensive ceasefire”, he said. The Taliban say before they make any commitment towards speaking with the Afghan government, they want to resolve the “occupation” matter with the American government first. The Taliban’s side was headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Barader, the militants’ former number two who was recently released from custody in Pakistan. He is said to have “a record of wanting peace and stability.”

President Ghani emphasised the need his governments’ ownership in the peace efforts and cautioned against a hasty agreement. On the 31st, Ghani sent a letter to President Trump asking to slow down the pace of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. This comes after last month’s report that Trump was mulling over a withdrawal of half of the US troops in the country. On the 29th, President Ghani called on the Taliban to engage directly with the Afghan government.

Taliban and Afghan political figures will meet in Moscow next month.

Politics

On the 3rd, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) started the registration process for presidential hopefuls. So far, 18 candidates have presented their election tickets. President Ghani, former National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar and Chief Executive Abdullah are among the key hopefuls. President Ghani replaced General Dostum with Amrullah Saleh on his ticket. All teams have a mix of major ethnic groups.

After repeated delays, on the 15th, the IEC announced preliminary parliamentary results for the last two provinces of Baghlan and Kabul. Surprisingly, many new faces won seats in Kabul; the top four being wealthy businessmen. Angered candidates who lost staged protests and blocked roads near the IEC offices.

Security

Despite the onset of the snowy season which normally brings violence levels down, bloodshed continued in many parts of the country with the highest concentration of clashes taking place in the provinces of Helmand, Urozgan, Faryab and Nangarhar. On the 21st, militants attacked a National Directorate Security facility in Wardak killing over 44, and injuring more than 100. The facility was used as a training centre for pro-government fighters. Two days later, Afghan officials said they killed Noman, the Taliban commander who was the mastermind behind the attack.

On the 14th, a Taliban suicide bomber detonated a car bomb near the Green Village compound in Kabul. The blast left at least five dead and injured more than 100, most of whom were civilians including 23 children. It is the fourth time since 2012 that the compound is attacked. The Green Village is used by international organisations to house foreigners. On the 24th, at least sixteen members of the same family were killed in an air strike on a home in Sangin, Helmand. Officials say, the strike was carried out during heavy fighting between Afghan forces and Taliban militants.

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.

On the 5th, Afghan Special Forces rescued twelve people from a Taliban prison in Helmand on the same day that militants kidnapped 15 government employees in Farah. Insurgents suffered significant losses on the 6th, when Afghan and coalition forces stepped up ground operations and airstrikes in Kandahar province.

On the 17th, coalition forces conducted separate operations killing over 39 Taliban fighters and destroying 30 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Badghis and five in Nangarhar.

Addressing the World Economic Forum on the 25th, President Ghani acknowledged that more than 45,000 members of the country's security forces had been killed since he took office in 2014. "The number of international casualties is less than 72. It shows who is doing the fighting", he said.

Humanitarian & Development

A report by Action on Armed Violence, a charity, shows civilian casualties in Afghanistan from explosive weapons rose by more than a third in 2018, against an otherwise downward global trend. The report also shows suicide attacks causing 62% of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, out of which 78% is by IEDs. Civilian casualties caused by Daesh (Islamic State) explosives increased by 90% in 2018.

On the 21st, Afghanistan's human rights records were reviewed at the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review. Members of the UN Human Rights Council emphasised the need for the Afghan government to introduce protection mechanisms for human rights defenders, implement laws and protect civilians in conflict. The UPR is a periodic review of human rights records in all 193 UN Member States.

At least 30 people were killed and seven injured when a gold mine collapsed on the 6th in Badakhshan. The victims were villagers who were mining for gold illegally, according to officials. The villagers had dug a 60-meter deep shaft in a riverbed and were inside when a landslide caused it to cave in.

President Trump belittled India's reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan on the 3rd for funding a library in Afghanistan, suggesting it was of no use. He said, talking about the library was a major part of his five-hour meeting with Prime Minister Modi. Indian officials couldn't find any reference to a library in their meeting, but said the Prime Minister highlighted the building of the new parliament in Afghanistan. They suggest President Trump likely mistook "parliament" for "library". India's reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan is estimated to be between three to five billion dollars.

Rights

In a new report from Transparency International, an international NGO, Afghanistan scored only 16 points out of 100 on the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index. The index ranks 182 countries on a scale from 1 to 100, where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean. According to the charity, Afghanistan ranked 172 out of 180, following Syria, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan. According to the NGO, Denmark and New Zealand are the most transparent countries.

Afghanistan was ranked for the second time as the most dangerous country for journalists, with 120 cases of violence in 2018, including 17 murders, officials from Journalists Safety Committee said. On the 5th, Afghan journalist Javid Noori was executed by Taliban militants at a roadblock in Farah, making him the first journalist to be killed in 2019.

In January, Pakistan abolished the facility of on-arrival visas for Afghan nationals reportedly due to increasing security risks. Following the decision, Afghan nationals will need to apply for visas in Pakistani missions in Afghanistan. Islamabad has also restricted the mobility of Afghan nationals in the country.

People & Culture

ArtLords, a group of Afghan activists and artists, have been nominated for the 2019 Freedom of Expression Awards. The group was selected from over 400 public nominations. The awards want to celebrate individuals who had a significant impact in the global fight to end corruption and censorship. ArtLords is a Kabul based grassroots movement of artists who encourage citizens to paint murals on Kabul walls to highlight social problems, combat corruption and defend freedom of expression.

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Abdul Salam Maftoon, a contestant on the TV singing contest Afghan Star, got extra attention after people noticed his resemblance to the Canadian Prime Minister. The 29-year-old singer from Badakhshan said “I didn’t know anything about Justin Trudeau until I saw the photos on social media”. The resemblance was first pointed out on air by an Afghan-Canadian judge and Maftoon became a celebrity soon after. He is now one of the five contestants who made it through to the finals.