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Afghanistan in December 2016

Politics

The relationship between the National Unity Government (NUG) and Parliament continued to be fraught with tension this month. On the 21st, MPs rejected the government's draft budget, citing unfair imbalances in the funding allocated to different provinces. In the meantime, there was ongoing confusion regarding the status of seven ministers dismissed by Parliament in November. On the 22nd, some MPs claimed that the Supreme Court had upheld their decision constitutionally, although the NUG maintained it was still awaiting an official verdict.

Internationally, Afghan peace and development continued to be on regional agendas. The Heart of Asia Conference, held in India on 3-4th, concluded with an official pledge by participants to end terrorism in Afghanistan. A visit from the outgoing US Defense Secretary on the 9th saw a re-affirmation of continued long-term involvement in the country, despite ongoing uncertainties regarding the incoming Trump administration and its priorities. Elsewhere, controversy emerged on the 27th when a trilateral meeting between China, Russia and Pakistan - discussing Afghan security and the rise of Islamic State (IS) - took place in Moscow without the participation of the NUG. The participants agreed to help remove 'Taliban leaders' names from the UN sanctions list, going against the Afghan government's current stance.

On the 15th, an official investigation was launched by the Attorney General's Office into allegations that Vice President Rashid Dostum had illegally detained, sexually assaulted and tortured a local rival in his home province of Jawzjan. The allegations had drawn stark condemnation from representatives of the international community.

Peace and Security

Military operations against the Taliban and IS continued throughout the month, largely in eastern, southern and northern provinces of Afghanistan. Official estimates released at the end of the month reported that counter-insurgency operations in 2016 had resulted in a total of 30,000 battle-related deaths. Although details were not released on what proportion of deaths were Afghan military personnel, it is thought that figures were up 10% compared to 2015. Despite growing international concern regarding the recent rise of IS in Afghanistan, a UN Security Council report this month instead pointed to a substantial weakening in the group's position compared to 2015, having now been reduced to territory covering only three and a half districts in the eastern provinces.

In terms of possible peace negotiations, the Taliban offered this month to hold direct talks with the US if it were to recognise its political office in Qatar and remove senior leaders from UN blacklists. However, the UN continued its calls for an inclusive negotiation process without conditions from either side. Following the trilateral meeting between China, Pakistan and Russia (see above), the head of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security warned of countries allying themselves with the Taliban to combat the regional threat from IS. Earlier in the month, Russia had indeed confirmed that it has official diplomatic links with the Taliban, with the purpose to protect its political offices and regional interests in Central Asia.

Meanwhile, Afghans continued to bear the brunt of terrorist activity. On the 17th, gunmen shot and killed five female airport employees and their driver in Kandahar. On the 21st, the Taliban claimed responsibility for an attack on Helmand MP Mir Wali Khan's residence in Kabul, killing eight people including members of the MP's family. In a separate attack, Bamian MP Fakuri Beheshti narrowly survived a bomb attack linked to IS.

Rights

The UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan released a report on juvenile detention centres on the 4th, finding positive trends in the treatment of child detainees. However, the report also highlighted the need to improve in-detention education and post-rehabilitation care, as well as ensuring progress is consistent across all centres.

On the 12th, the head of the Ulema council in Takhar was dismissed following a number of derogatory comments on the role of women in society. On the 25th, the upper house of Parliament approved a law criminalising harassment against women and children, imposing fines and jail terms on perpetrators.

The first repatriation of rejected asylum seekers from Germany took place on the 15th, following the signing of the EU Joint Way Forward agreement in October. The arrival of 38 returnees in Kabul re-awakened debate regarding the agreement – which foresees mass repatriations over the coming months – in light of ongoing insecurity.

Another significant returnee this month was ex-Hizb-e-Islami commander Zardad Faryadi, who arrived back in Afghanistan having served a prison sentence in the UK for torture and human rights violations. Human Rights Watch condemned the unexpected return of the former war criminal, claiming that it posed a risk to the rights and protection of witnesses and victims. In a TV interview Faryadi lamented his crimes and said he was ready to face justice in Afghanistan as well.

Humanitarian and Development

On the 18th, the Minister for Education announced that approximately 6 million children are enrolled in schools across Afghanistan, contradicting claims by the previous government that the figure was closer to 11 million. With education having been seen by donors as one of Afghanistan's key success stories since 2001, the minister alleged that previous officials may have been motivated to inflate figures due to corruption or misuse of resources.

Integrity Watch Afghanistan, an independent watchdog, published a report this month estimating that Afghans have paid around \$3 billion in bribes, a 50% increase compared to 2014. The judicial system emerged as the main offender, with those surveyed for the report indicating that they had been asked to pay bribes 55% of the time they had dealings with local or national courts. The Supreme Court has summoned the watchdog to justify their 'wrong' report.

The NUG continued to emphasise the importance of regional connectivity in reducing long-term dependence on overseas aid. On the sidelines of the Heart of Asia conference, trade relations with India were further boosted by an agreement to initiate direct air cargo links between the two countries, reducing Afghan dependence on Pakistani sea ports.

On the 22nd, the Ministry of Public Health opened Afghanistan's first drug rehabilitation centre for women and children. However, this 150-bed centre may seem inadequate in light of the country's one million female and 100,000 child drug addicts.

People and Culture

The second phase of restoring Kabul's Darul Aman Palace was launched on the 8th. It is hoped that the historical site – left in ruins after decades of conflict – will be transformed into a national museum and guest house upon its completion. Notably, 25% of the architects working on the project are female.

An Afghan man has been awarded the prestigious Overseas Sword award from the UK's top military academy at Sandhurst. With the award recognising Officer Cadet Behzad Heidari to be the best of this year's foreign student intake at the academy, CEO Abdullah has already promised that a special commission awaits him on his return to Afghanistan.

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