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Afghanistan in October 2017

Peace and Politics

On the 1st, President Ghani met with Pakistan's army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa at the Presidential Palace in Kabul. This was the first top-level interaction between Kabul and Islamabad since Trump's announcement in August of increasing troop levels in Afghanistan and putting more pressure on Pakistan.

A Senior Officials Meeting between Afghan and international partners (representatives from over 50 countries and international organizations) took place in Kabul on the 4th. Afghan officials said they have fully honoured their reform commitments made to the international community but were dismayed that international partners did not disperse the pledged funds to them on time.

On the 23rd, American Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson made a secret two-hour visit to Afghanistan. Tillerson arrived in a military transport plane to meet up with Afghan leaders inside a bunker in Bagram military airbase. Tillerson stated that the U.S. would stay in Afghanistan until peace was restored but warned that this commitment is based on the conditions that Afghan government implements reform and counters corruption.

On the 24th President Ghani went to India for a meeting with India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. They discussed bilateral strategic partnerships, expansion of economic cooperation, investments, transit, regional connectivity and fighting terrorism.

On the 29th, a senate discussion ended up in a physical fight. Kandahar senator Rahmatullah Achakzai was suspended after allegedly assaulting Senator Mohammad Hanif Hanifi. The debate was about holding a traditional Loya Jirga to restore people's faith in the government, a cause championed by former President Karzai.

Security

On the 7th, senior Afghan officials welcomed the arrival of new Black Hawks (U.S. made military helicopters) which will begin to significantly change the young Afghan air force. At a ceremony at the Kandahar airfield President Ghani formally accepted the new helicopters calling it a historic day that would allow the air force to better respond to the needs of the security forces.

On the 20th, two Shiite mosques were attacked in Kabul and Ghor killing as many as 88 civilians. Daesh claimed responsibility for the mosque attack in Kabul but no group claimed responsibility for the Ghor attack. The next day another suicide bombing took place which targeted a minibus carrying students from the city's military academy. At least fifteen cadets were killed.

On the 3rd, American Defence Secretary James Mattis said that for the first time since the 16 year war, all six Afghan military corps were now on the offensive. Ever since Obama declared the end to a "combat mission" in Afghanistan in 2014, the Taliban have been on the offensive leading to a stalemate. With Trump's new strategy promising increased troops in Afghanistan and more authority for the U.S. forces to employ airstrikes, the Afghan army has been encouraged to use more offensive tactics.

Notwithstanding this positive review of Afghan forces, the Taliban conducted a series of successful attacks in October. On the 19th, an Afghan army unit in the south was almost completely wiped out in a Taliban attack. The Taliban used a new tactic of packing a vehicle captured from the security forces with explosives and driving it into military and police compounds. At least 43 soldiers out of a unit of 60 were killed in the attack. Only two soldiers remained unscathed. Two similar attacks occurred on the 17th in Ghazni and Paktia killing over 40 police officers.

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On the 5th, the Afghan security forces confirmed that over 24 Afghan security forces were killed in clashes in Uruzgan province during four days of fighting. Nearly 30 Taliban insurgents were also killed in the clashes. Afghan security forces were able to re-take the areas that the Taliban had taken over in the province.

On the 2nd, Denmark – which is part of the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, announced it will be sending 55 additional soldiers to the country to increase security efforts after a car bomber attacked a Danish convoy. Denmark already has 97 soldiers in Afghanistan.

Rights

Amnesty International announced that almost 10,000 Afghan asylum seekers were deported back to Afghanistan from Europe in 2016 after their applications for asylum in Europe were rejected. These asylum seekers were forcibly returned to Afghanistan where they are at risk of torture, kidnapping and death.

A UN report shows an increase in civilian casualties due to airstrikes. According to the report more than 8,000 civilians were killed in the past nine months. 64 percent of the civilians were killed by insurgents and 20 percent by the Afghan forces. The report also shows that civilian casualties in airstrikes has increased by 50 percent during this period. Foreign forces' airstrikes have increased following the announcement of the new American strategy for Afghanistan.

A report released by Human Rights Watch this month indicated that over 60 percent of Afghan girls are not in school. Despite efforts from the Afghan Government and international agencies to improve girls' education, about one third of girls in the country are still not in school and lag significantly behind the number of boys in school. The report illustrates that progress has been made but insecurity, poverty and displacement are now driving many girls out of school.

Humanitarian and Development

On the 9th, the International Committee of the Red Cross announced that they will be drastically cutting down their operations in Afghanistan following attacks that have killed seven of their staff members this year. ICRC has been operating in Afghanistan for more than 30 years where they had been running their fourth biggest humanitarian program in the world. An ICRC representative stated that their exposure to risk has become their greatest challenge and concern.

An American-Canadian couple who were kidnapped by the Haqqani network in 2012 in Afghanistan were finally freed this month in Pakistan after a successful operation by the Pakistani forces. The couple's three children were released too. The Canadian man claimed that one of their infant children was killed during captivity and that his wife was raped by the militants. The Taliban have denied these claims.

People and Culture

On the 8th, Afghan singer Aryana Sayeed was honoured with a bravery award from the Afghanistan National Institute of Music for her unwavering commitment to promoting music in the country. The award was given to honour her successful concerts in the country and specifically her Independence Day concerts which extremist groups tried to shut down.

Afghan athletes who participated in the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games in Ashgabat Turkmenistan brought home a total of twelve medals which included one gold. The team stood 26th out of the 64 countries who participated in the games.

On the 11th, Ahmad Yasin Salik Qaderi returned home from Mongolia after winning a gold medal at the World Amateur Bodybuilding Championship for the 90kg weight division. Bodybuilders from 100 countries participated in this years contest.

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