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Afghanistan in April 2016

Peace and Politics

The deadly attack in Kabul (details in the Security section below) sank the hopes for peace talks with the Taliban. Six days after the attack, in a rare joint session of the two houses of Parliament, President Ghani called the insurgents terrorists who 'take pleasure in the torn-up body of our innocents'. He would no longer ask Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the peace table but to fight them on their own soil. He also announced the end of the government's practice of pardoning Taliban detainees. They will be tried and executed if the Afghan laws demand it. He called on the Afghan army to force the Taliban to beg for peace. However he continued to extend a welcoming hand to Taliban fighters willing to resolve their differences through talks.

In response, the Taliban spokesperson said they will continue their holy war against the 'American puppet regime in Afghanistan'. A week after the attack, the Taliban announced that they have sent a high level delegation to Pakistan to discuss border and refugee problems with the Pakistani government.

In the meantime, representatives of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i Islami, the country's second largest insurgent group, concluded their third meeting with government's High Peace Council. This insurgent group now says the withdrawal of all international forces from Afghanistan is not their pre-condition but the ultimate goal. In exchange, they would like their leaders' names to be removed from the UN sanctions list.

On the 9th, the Afghan Parliament confirmed General Taj Mohammad Jahid as the new Interior Minister and Mohammad Farid Hamidi as the new Attorney General. Hamidi, a prominent human rights expert, was Commissioner of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission for over ten years.

On the 9th, US Secretary of State John Kerry made an unannounced visit to Kabul. His main object was to demonstrate support to the National Unity Government, which faces tough security, political and economic challenges.

On the 5th, the Afghan Cabinet decided to add the 'ethnicity' and 'nationality' fields to the electronic national ID card. If confirmed by the Parliament, electronic IDs can be finally distributed after years of political arguments. Such IDs can considerably boost the integrity of future elections.

Security

In one of the bloodiest assaults in years, the Taliban launched a complex attack on the government's elite guards unit in Kabul on the 19th. Numbers of civilian casualties from the assault were some of the highest Kabul has seen in years: 64 dead and another 347 wounded, mostly civilians. The blast shattered windows up to a mile away. A week before, the Taliban had announced their 'Omari' spring offensive - named after their late founder – pledging to launch large-scale offensives against government strongholds backed by suicide and guerrilla attacks.

Other Omari activities were launched on the 15th, when Taliban militants attacked several districts surrounding Kunduz, the fifth largest city of Afghanistan. Government forces reportedly fought back and killed dozens of Taliban fighters. Qari Saleem, the Taliban's head of military operations in Kunduz, was also captured. On the 11th, an unknown suicide bomber struck a bus of army recruits in Nangarhar, killing at least twelve and wounding 26 people.

This month the Afghan Air Force launched its first surveillance drone flight in Helmand from the Helmand ScanEagle site. Named after the unmanned aerial vehicle provided by the US, this is the first of eight in Afghanistan that will be operational in the next two and half years. This technology is hoped to considerably increase the Afghan army's intelligence collection and reconnaissance ability.

US Air Force data shows that their drones are firing more frequently than conventional warplanes for the first time since operations started in Afghanistan. Their data showed strikes by unmanned aircraft accounted for 56% of weapons

deployed by the Air Force in Afghanistan in 2015, up dramatically from 5% in 2011. On the 7th, American airstrikes in Paktika killed at least 17 civilians, according to local elders. However, Afghan and American officials said Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters had been targeted.

Rights

On the 14th, Afghan Journalists' Safety Committee announced that sexual harassment is the biggest challenge female media workers face in Afghanistan. About 59% of respondents said their male colleagues subjected them to one or more forms of sexual abuse. They included a wide range, from passing sexual comments in the office and online to molestation.

Civil society activists on the 4th, spoke against ethnic-based appointments in the National Unity Government. The representatives of Civil Society Joint Working Group, a civil society network, were speaking ahead of a joint Afghan and international community's officials meeting in Kabul. They said poor governance and nepotism has resulted in around 2,400 government positions remaining vacant, in a country troubled by more than 25% unemployment rates.

Humanitarian and Development

The outgoing head of the International Red Cross, Jean-Nicolas Marti, warned on the 24th that Afghanistan has plunged into its worst humanitarian crisis since 2001. To address that the ICRC is increasing its budget by 20% to reach \$100 million this year. He emphasised the dangers of forgetting Afghanistan as the world's attention is being diverted elsewhere. "The ICRC would never call for a military operation, but before they [the international military forces] pull out altogether, I do think they should think twice about that."

One of the Afghan economy's brightest spots, the telecoms industry, reported bleak results and prospects. A combination of new government taxes, a dwindling pool of customers and extortion by insurgents have reversed the steady growth it was experiencing from 2002 – 2012. The telecoms industry is the country's biggest job provider, employing around 140,000 workers, and pumping \$148 million in into the economy.

On the 21st, the watchdog Integrity Watch Afghanistan found that about 65% of financial flows in Afghanistan stem from illicit sources including opium production, tax evasion and bribery. These funds find their way into the legitimate economy through money laundering, or are smuggled out. In 2011, an estimated \$4.5 billion was taken out of the country through Kabul Airport.

On the 27th Doctors Without Borders (MSF) called again for an independent investigation into the strikes on its hospital in Kunduz last October. This came after Pentagon statements that the attack was not intentional and therefore not a war crime. The Pentagon's investigation had found that the attack, which killed 42 patients, staff and caretakers, resulted from a combination of battlefield fatigue and equipment failures. The 16 service members responsible for this mistake had been subject to disciplinary action such as suspension, letters of reprimand, counselling and retraining.

On the 28th, unknown gunmen in Jalalabad abducted an Australian humanitarian worker Katherine Jane Wilson, also known as Kerry. Kerry, a veteran aid worker with many years' experience in Afghanistan, works for and founded Zardozi, a small Afghan NGO. It helps women in poor urban areas start small businesses selling handicrafts and clothing to shopkeepers and traders.

People and Culture

Khan Wali Adel, a 24-year old man from Paktia, launched an indefinite sit-in protest in Kabul against 'baad', the practice of giving away women to settle family disputes. Adel's father had given away two of his sisters and is now expecting 10 girls from another tribe in compensation for the murder of Adel's two brothers. He said 'men and women are both human beings. Please don't allow women to be traded as slaves to resolve the criminal deeds of men'. He also called for his family to allow his remaining sisters to attend school.

After about 25 years, ordinary Afghan women can finally enjoy the cinema experience again. Galaxy Family Cinema, the first of its kind, was inaugurated on the 31st March in Kabul. It shows mainly Bollywood and Western films. With only 72 seats, sales of more than 1,000 tickets in the first week is impressive. Hanifa Rayeesi, a customer stepping inside a cinema after 24 years said 'this rekindled my memories of youth, when watching films in cinemas was a favourite leisure time activity'.