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Afghanistan in July 2016

Peace and Politics

This month, Afghanistan's relations with the international community solidified. At the NATO Warsaw Summit in Poland on July 8-9th, allies agreed to sustain the Resolute Support Mission beyond 2016. The funding for the Afghan security forces will be \$5 billion a year to 2020. The Afghan Government pledged to self-fund their security forces by the end of 2024.

But relations with Pakistan remained tense. At the Warsaw Summit, President Ghani said Pakistan maintains the 'dangerous distinction between good and bad terrorists'. Meanwhile, on the 13th, a US Congressional Committee said it was time to consider putting Pakistan on the list of state sponsors of terrorism if it doesn't change its ways.

On the 2nd, Hezb-e-Islami, the country's second largest insurgent group, said peace negotiations have come to a halt. They claim the Afghan government is requesting more than 20 amendments to the approved draft of the proposed peace agreement signed the previous month. The group's main qualm is the extension of American troops in Afghanistan agreed by the Afghan and American governments in 2014.

On the 14th Afghan officials said the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, composed of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US and China, has no plans to meet again any time soon. However, talks about the peace process between US Commander General John Nicholson and Pakistani Army Chief General Raheel Sharif took place on the 21st.

Security

The UN's mid-year report for civilian casualties, released on the 25th, reported a four per cent increase in deaths and injuries compared to the same January-June period in 2015. The continuing upward trend saw 1,601 civilian deaths and 3,565 injured, almost a third of whom were children.

On the 23rd, Kabul was afflicted by the deadliest suicide attack since 2001 which killed at least 80 civilians and wounded 231. The victims were mostly Hazara youths and supporters of Enlightening Movement who had staged a peaceful demonstration against a government electricity project decision. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. A national day of mourning was declared and President Ghani announced that Dehmazang Circle, the scene of the attack, would be renamed Martyrs Square.

For the first time since 2014, the US clearly ramped up their military efforts in Afghanistan this month. On the 6th, President Obama announced the US would once again delay the full withdrawal of troops, leaving 8,400 US troops in Afghanistan until the end of the year. US forces now have more flexibility to use airstrikes in the country. The US Commander in Afghanistan said this would allow Afghan and US forces to fight on the offensive.

Fears mounted that the Taliban could take control of key districts in northern and eastern parts of the country. The Dasht-e-Archi district in Kunduz fell to the Taliban on the 21st. Opposition groups control over nine districts and more than 50 others are under serious threat.

Islamic State (Daesh) presence became a greater worry, particularly in Badakhshan and Nangarhar. On the 10th, an Afghan General revealed that Daesh militants do not loot ammunition after raids against forces, suggesting they are well financed. Ghani had vowed to make Afghanistan the 'graveyard' of Daesh. An airstrike on the 14th destroyed the Daesh radio station in Nangarhar.

On the 13th, it was announced that Umar Khalifa, the mastermind behind the 2014 attack on a Pakistani school that killed more than 130 children, was killed by a US drone strike in Afghanistan.

On the 21st it was revealed that poor Afghan soldiers sell their ammunition casings to scrap metal dealers for money and sometimes fire their weapons on the spot for the sole purpose of selling to dealers. The Ministry of Defence has launched an investigation into the claims.

Rights

Child marriage once again came under scrutiny this month. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission announced on the 17th that child marriage was on the rise. They called for greater investigation by authorities into those individuals who both offer and accept child brides, and those who endorse their marriage.

In Ghor a 14-year old bride Zahra, who was four months pregnant, died from burns to 90% of her body. Her family accused her in-laws of torturing and killing her, whilst the in-laws said her death was the result of self-immolation. Zahra's father was also accused of crimes in giving her in marriage when she was only 13. Meanwhile an elderly cleric in Ghor was arrested by police for marrying a six year-old girl, whose parents claim was taken from them without consent. The unnamed girl was taken to a women's shelter in Ghor, awaiting collection by her parents.

Humanitarian and Development

At the NATO Summit, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau renewed more than \$150 million per year for aid projects in Afghanistan and to help the country's security forces. Their funding pledge to 2020 places greater emphasis than before on development aid, with \$56 million per year for the Afghan security forces and \$90 million for aid. Also this month, India pledged \$25 million to Afghanistan to fund micro development projects in the country.

On the 20th in Kabul, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs met delegates from European Union countries and foreign diplomats to discuss steps to improve Afghanistan's economic stability and socioeconomic development. Ahead of October's Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, Minister of Foreign Affairs Salahuddin Rabbani stated that expanding Afghanistan's regional economic, commercial and transit ties will be critical in developing the private sector and enhancing economic partnerships in the region.

The Minister of Refugees and Repatriation stated on the 20th that Afghanistan would provide free plots of land to refugees returning to their homeland. Addressing a group of registered Afghan refugees in Islamabad, Minister Balkhi called for efforts to create an environment conducive to voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration. On the 27th the Ministry stated 10,000 refugees had returned home in only a four-day period, contributing to the 200,000 that have already returned home this year.

Afghanistan became the 164th country to join the World Trade Organisation on the 29th. After passing some final precondition laws, the membership is expected to confer benefits such as granting access to new markets and global supply chains. On the 21st, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a three-year Extended Credit Facility arrangement for Afghanistan. The \$44.9 million will help stimulate growth by consolidating progress on macroeconomic and structural fronts and catalysing continued support from donors, a statement by IMF claimed.

Direct flights between Kabul and Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang in China, resumed on the 13th after a three year hiatus. CEO Abdullah commented that the resumption of the air route will strengthen bilateral cooperation in economy, trade and security.

On the 16th, three aid workers from the Afghan Red Crescent Society who were abducted in Sar-e-Pul province were released. An Indian aid worker abducted in Kabul last month was released on the 23rd.

People and Culture

Massoud and Mahmud Hassani, two Afghan brothers now living in the Netherlands, launched a drone capable of disabling landmines 20 times faster than manual procedures. Having lost friends to mine blasts as youngsters, the brothers have combined drone technology, 3D printing and robotics with a metal detector to find and ultimately destroy landmines. They hope to test the device in Afghanistan this year.

Light of Ashes, authored by Zahra Yaganah, a survivor of child marriage and violence, became one of the fastest selling books in Afghanistan. The first 1,000 copies nearly sold out within three months. Written in Dari, it is part fiction and part gut-wrenching memoir tainted by the oppression Zahra says almost all Afghan women suffer.