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Afghanistan in March 2016

Politics and Peace

The 20th of March marked Nowruz, the Afghan new year. President Ghani's Nowruz address spoke of peace. However, hopes of direct talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government faltered when the Taliban continued to reject joining the table unless their demands were met, including a complete withdrawal of NATO troops. The Taliban announcement came just days after Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Advisor, said that Pakistan still has significant influence over the Afghan Taliban because the group's leadership is based in Pakistan. The statement was unexpected because Pakistan has always denied any such claims. Peace efforts were further complicated with infighting between Taliban factions in Herat, leading to 100 deaths amongst the groups.

On the 13th the military wing of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i Islami, the country's second largest insurgent group, said it would take part in peace negotiations with the government. Direct meetings between the government and the group took place mid-month. On the 31st it was reported that the group wants a 'power sharing' agreement with Kabul in exchange for peace.

Regional cooperation continued with Afghan officials urging China to support expansion of the Afghan Air Force. On the 9th China offered the Afghanistan army increased military aid to combat the Taliban. On the 10th India also offered their support, pledging \$20.4 million in fresh development aid to Afghanistan.

On the 26th the chief of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani, resigned. A spokesperson for the IEC said he resigned for reasons of "national interest." On the 29th Ahmad Masoud Tokhi, the Director of the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission, stated in parliament that over 25,000 government positions remain vacant.

On the 16th the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for another year. On the 18th Tadamichi Yamamoto was appointed as Special Representative for UNAMA, moving from Deputy and succeeding Nicholas Haysom who served in this role since 2014.

Security

On the 2nd a suicide bomber and gunmen attacked an Indian consulate in eastern Afghanistan, leaving three people dead and more than a dozen wounded. On the 10th unknown gunmen in northern Sar-e-Pul abducted at least 11 bus passengers. A number of MPs expressed their concerns in parliament over increased insecurity in central Ghazni and southern Helmand provinces. On the 29th four people died in a Kabul roadside bomb blast.

Multiple attacks this month targeted Afghan police and security forces. The Taliban attacked police and intelligence offices in southern Helmand on the 9th, resulting in three deaths. Unknown gunmen murdered a female police officer in southern Kandahar. On the 24th seven members of the Afghan Local Police were shot dead by their comrades in Kandahar, whilst the next day Taliban militants killed an army general, also in Kandahar.

Tensions flared in Balkh province between supporters of Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum and those of the province's governor Atta Mohammad Noor. Posters of Dostum were supposedly removed by Noor's people, leading to street protests. In Faryab province it took a more serious turn when a shootout between Dostum and Noor supporters left one dead and five wounded on the 24th.

Rights

Bitter memories from 2015 were brought to the fore on the 10th when President Ghani ordered the reopening of Farkhunda Malikzada's case, the woman beaten to death last year by a Kabul mob. The announcement was made after the

country's highest court reduced the sentences of 13 men convicted of her murder. On the 20th activists in Kabul marked the one-year anniversary of Malikzada's death, unveiling a monument on the bank of the Kabul River.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission released a report denouncing forced gynaecological exams used as "virginity tests." The results of these exams are sometimes used as evidence in cases involving "moral crimes" where a woman is accused of engaging in sex outside of marriage. The report states that the practice amounts to a gross violation of human rights and sexual harassment and asks the Afghan government to ban all such forced tests.

More than a dozen U.S. military personnel have been disciplined but face no criminal charges for their involvement in the bombing of a Medecins Sans Frontiers hospital. The incident caused the deaths of 42 people in Kunduz city last October. On the 22nd the new commander of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan issued an apology to the families of victims killed in the bombing.

Nai, an organization supporting open media in Afghanistan, reported that the 1394 solar year, March 2015 to March 2016, had been the worst for journalists and media-workers to date in Afghanistan. The January 20th attack on Tolo TV workers by the Taliban, in which seven journalists were killed, captured national attention as one of the worst attacks on media workers in recent years.

Human Rights Watch criticized European Union members for imposing certain border restrictions specifically on Afghans. On the 21st, it was reported that a confidential EU discussion document proposed using the October 2016 aid summit in Brussels as 'leverage' for the return of migrants to Afghanistan. Amnesty International found that Turkey had forcibly returned dozens of Afghan refugees to Kabul without completing their asylum procedures.

Humanitarian and Development

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is in a downward spiral, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross warned after a four-day trip to the country this month. He cited the increasing civilian death toll and attacks on medical facilities as major concerns. The Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan stated this month that it plans to make Afghanistan mine free by 2023.

On World Tuberculosis Day the Ministry of Public Health stated that more than 37,000 cases of Tuberculosis were registered in Afghanistan last year.

In development news, the Japanese embassy in Kabul promised to provide US\$1.5 million to help upgrade the Salang Corridor, Afghanistan's main north-south road transport route. On the 3rd, Google helped launch a start-up initiative in Afghanistan. Start Up Grind, operating already in 85 countries, will provide aspiring young entrepreneurs with advice, guidance and inspiration from top entrepreneurs, CEOs and Founders. .

Pakistan's import of fresh fruits from Afghanistan via the Torkham and Kurram Agency increased by 46 per cent during the first eight months of the current fiscal year. Officials from the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries said that Afghanistan exported at least 24,000 tons of raisins over the past year.

On the 12th, the European Union Delegation in Afghanistan launched its 2016 Anti-Corruption Campaign. The campaign aims to help Afghan citizens fight corruption and mobilize the government to take stronger action.

People and Culture

Afghanistan's cricket team competed in the Cricket World Twenty20, where they delighted fans with a win against the West Indies, who went on to win the tournament. Afghan bowler Mohammad Nabi took the highest number of wickets in the tournament, topping the table with 12.

The first cinema for families opened in Kabul on the 12th, whilst on the 10th the Roya Film company launched a book and film club, helping people access new books. Saber Husaini also promoted literacy by distributing books to children across Bamiyan province via his home-made mobile bicycle library.

Afghanistan's Bakhtariyan Treasure is being prepared for a move to an exhibition in Japan. Visitors from across the world are gearing up to view the treasures which include 3,000 year old relics including statues, jewellery and decorative bowls.