



## Afghanistan in April 2015

### Politics

Seven months after the National Unity Government was formed, on the 18<sup>th</sup> the Afghan Parliament approved 16 out of the remaining 17 cabinet members. There are now four female ministers. Differences remain between President Ghani and CEO Abdullah over the candidate for Ministry of Defence. Despite criticisms by parliamentarians and civil society, the Afghan provinces are still being run by acting governors.

Tensions between Ghani and Abdullah mounted over the chairperson of the Electoral Reform Commission. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> local media reported that Jandad Spinghar, the head of an independent election watchdog, is to replace Shukria Barakzai MP as the head of the Commission. This has been partly in response to civil society groups that had demanded the Commission to be more technical than political.

Ashraf Ghani continued his regional trips by visiting Iran and India where he spoke about security and economy. In Iran he spoke to President Rouhani and Supreme Leader Khamenei about the Islamic State (IS) threats and the possibility of security cooperation including sharing of intelligence and conducting joint operations. The trip came after a row created by a Ghani statement that Afghanistan stands firm with Saudi Arabia. This was in the wake of the Saudi-led air strikes in Yemen which Iran severely criticises. In India, he promised Indian traders that he would leave no stone unturned to make Afghanistan an easier environment for their investments.

### Security

The Taliban launched their spring offensive in April. Fighting between militants and Afghan forces in Kunduz lasted over a week. The Taliban claimed that they inflicted heavy casualties on the Afghan army in three districts. At one point insurgents captured areas within 6 kilometres of the Kunduz Governor's office. These areas are now back under the Government's control. At least 40 insurgents, including six Tajikistani and Chechen nationals were reportedly killed. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, Interior Minister Noor-ul-Haq Ulumi said that 11 Afghan provinces face high security threats, and an additional nine face medium-level threats.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> a spokesperson of IS said they had carried out a suicide attack in Jalalabad that day. At least 33 people were killed and 100 injured in the blast that happened outside a local bank where government employees were lining up to get their salaries. Another suicide attack killed at least 20 people in the neighbouring province of Khost. The Taliban denied responsibility for the latter attack.

The fate of 31 Hazara passengers kidnapped by unknown gunmen in February remains unknown. CEO Abdullah joined the families of abductees in their sit-in protest camp near the Presidential Palace. The mother of one of the kidnapped men died of a heart attack in Ghazni after she was informed her son is among the abductees. A number of Hazara villagers from different districts of Ghazni have been stranded in Ghazni city as road insecurity prevents them from returning home. Shahgul Rezaye, a MP, said the Taliban are targeting Hazaras to try to match IS levels of brutality.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> CNN released videos of militants who have recently sworn allegiance to IS in the south of Kabul. On the 7<sup>th</sup> the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an ally of Islamic State (IS), released a video in which they behead an Afghan soldier. They threatened to kill others if the Afghan government does not meet their demands, which local media say includes a prisoner swap.

The security of other northern and north eastern provinces deteriorated in April too. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, gunmen attacked the provincial Attorney General's office in Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh, killing at least 10. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, the Taliban killed and kidnapped at least 33 members of the Afghan army in a surprise attack in Jurm district of Badakhshan. Graphic videos and pictures of beheaded Afghan soldiers terrified Afghans and brought into question the ability of the Afghan army to protect even themselves.

## **Rights**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> Amnesty International, an international rights group, criticised the Afghan government and international community for failing to protect women human rights defenders. In their latest report they documented how champions of women and girls' rights including activists, teachers, lawyers, students and politicians, are targeted by the Taliban but also in some cases by government officials.

Police in Badghis arrested the fathers of two children (a 6 year old girl and 11 year old boy) whose marriage had been arranged. The father of the bride had sold his daughter for Afghani 150,000 (circa £1,760).

## **Development and Humanitarian**

On the 28<sup>th</sup> a landslide killed at least 52 people, most of whom were women and children, in Khawahan district of Badakhshan. Nearly 100 homes were destroyed. Heavy snows blocked the roads to the affected area, hampering the rescue efforts.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> provincial officials confirmed that unknown gunmen abducted 19 de-miners in Paktia. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, Save the Children, an international aid agency, announced that five of their local staff had been killed by unknown gunmen. They had been abducted in March and killed after the gunmen's demands of prisoner release were not met. Afghanistan was named the most dangerous place for relief staff in the world in 2013, with 81 personnel killed.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> officials from International Organisation for Migration (IOM) voiced concerns over Iran's irresponsible deportation of Afghan refugees. In the last two months, around 55,000 Afghan women and men have been forced to return to Afghanistan without any heed to their destination or wellbeing. At least 10 – 20% of these returnees meet humanitarian vulnerability criteria.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> the Afghan Minister of Mines spoke of the continuing deadlock with Chinese mining firm MCC, over the £3 billion Mes Aynak site, one of the world's largest untapped copper deposits. The firm secured the contract in 2007, but has been unable to start the project due to lack of security. The deadlock is largely because MCC demands that royalties to the Afghan government should be decreased from 19.5% to 10%.

## **Culture and people**

Frame by Frame, an 'artful' documentary about four Afghan photojournalists, was premiered in the US. It has received five awards so far, including the grand jury prize at the Nashville Film Festival. Afghan photojournalists work under extremely difficult situations. Najibullah Musafar, one of those featured in the film, was recently sentenced to six months in prison because of an unclear intellectual property law.

In its World Happiness Report, the UN put Afghanistan among one of the least happy countries in the world. Ranked 153 out of 158, Afghanistan joins Syria and 8 sub-Saharan countries to form the bottom ten of the chart. Switzerland tops, while the UK stands 21<sup>st</sup>. Among Afghanistan's neighbours Uzbekistan (44) is the happiest, while Iran (110) is closest to Afghanistan.

27 year old Asghar Stanikzai became Afghanistan's Cricket Captain. Though a bowler, he is best known for scoring 90 unbeaten runs against Bangladesh in 2014, which secured Afghanistan's first victory against a Test playing nation. The Afghan Cricket Board hopes Stanikzai's appointment encourages younger cricketers and boosts the country's preparations for the next World Cup.