



Afghanistan in May 2017

Peace and Politics

The arrival of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the Hezb-e Islami party, in Kabul seemed to stir the political scene in May. On May 4th President Ghani welcomed him at the Presidential Palace where Hekmatyar delivered a lengthy speech to key political figures. Hekmatyar said, “We should commit to open a new door and forget the past”. A day later, Human Rights Watch sharply said the past should not be forgotten and Hekmatyar should be held accountable for the war crimes Hezb-e Islami had committed over the past three decades. On the 25th, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said they received a petition requesting justice for victims of crimes allegedly committed by Hekmatyar.

On the 23rd Jamiat-e Islami, the country's main Tajik political party formed a 64-member interim leadership council. Salahuddin Rabbani, the party's interim chairperson and Afghanistan's acting minister of foreign affairs, said their party will pursue a parliamentary political system to safeguard against a monopolisation of power. This is in complete opposition to Hekmatyar who called for a “strong centralised” government on the 4th. Notably absent from the Jamiat-e Islami meeting was longstanding member CEO Abdullah.

In keeping the terms of the peace deal with Hekmatyar, the Afghan Government released 55 Hezb-e Islami prisoners on the 2nd. From that list, 13 prisoners were not released because they were involved in plotting suicide attacks against foreigners. Hezb-e Islami says about 3,000 of its members still remains under government custody. On the 30th, an unknown gunman in Pakistan killed Mohammad Fareed, Hekmatyar's former secretary and relative.

The speculations that NATO would increase troop levels continued in May, even after NATO's Heads of State meeting on the 25th. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that a decision on troop levels would be made in the coming weeks. He welcomed commitments from several members to increase troop contributions. Australia will send 30 additional security advisers to Afghanistan, raising their contribution of military personnel to 300.

On the 15th, Afghan officials confirmed that the US plans to give the Afghan Air Force 165 Black Hawk helicopters by 2020, if the Afghan Ministry of Defence fights corruption. The first four helicopters will be given by next March. The US is increasingly using “conditionality” to improve accountability in the Ministry of Defence. A day later Farid Hamidi, Afghan Attorney General, said corruption in the security sector is one of the causes of the Taliban's success.

Security

The 26th marked the start of the fasting month of Ramadan, during which warfare is religiously prohibited; however, this didn't stop bloodshed in Afghanistan. On the 31st, a powerful bomb in Kabul's diplomatic quarter killed at least 100 people and wounded more than 600. This was the worst suicide attack in Afghanistan. Afghan officials say Haqqani militants planted about 1,500 kilograms of explosives in a septic tank vehicle and set it off when they were stopped at a security post. The majority of casualties were civilians including children and women. Kabulis flocked to donate blood to help those injured. Public health officials said they have collected 318,000 cc's of blood since the attack. The attacks were followed by international condemnations, which included German and American leaders, whose embassies in Kabul were badly affected.

In a video address, President Ghani called for “national mobilisation” against terror, and said he would shortly consult politicians and the public to give more power to anti-terror forces. He also approved the hanging of eleven Haqqani and Taliban prisoners.

On the 27th, the first day of Ramadan, at least thirteen people in the south-eastern province of Khost were killed in a suicide car bomb. The explosives were detonated near a military base, but a public bus station bore most of the force of the blast.

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The Taliban stepped up attacks in the south of the country. On the 22nd, they attacked the Shah Wali Kot army base killing at least ten soldiers and wounding nine. The battle continued for several hours and also resulted in the death of twenty militants. On the 23rd, militants killed at least six policemen in Sangin district of Helmand. Violence continued in the northeast. On the 9th, the Taliban fought Afghan security forces as close as 1.5 kilometres from the centre of Kunduz city. However, a week later, Afghan security forces - supported by American Special Forces - recaptured Qala-e Zal district of Kunduz.

While Daesh fighters suffered a heavy blow in eastern Afghanistan, they also conducted several successful attacks. On the 8th, Afghan officials confirmed the death of Abdul Hasib, the head of Daesh in Afghanistan in a battle that also saw two American rangers killed. A week after the announcement, Daesh militants attacked the Afghan state television station in Nangarhar, killing six people and wounding 24. On the 3rd, a Daesh suicide bomber targeted a NATO convoy in Kabul, killing eight civilians and wounding 28, including three NATO soldiers.

In May, it was reported that American warplanes dropped more weapons on Afghanistan in April than in any other single month since 2012. The US Air Force unleashed 460 bombs, missiles or other ordnance last month. This is seven times more than the quantity deployed in April last year, and is partly attributed to the on-going war on Daesh.

On the 1st, SIGAR, a US Government watchdog said that casualties among Afghan security forces remain "shockingly high". The report put the death toll at 807, and the number of injured at 1,328 in the first two months of the year.

Rights

On the 14th, a man in Kunduz killed his wife and a man in his house, after which he turned himself in to the police. A Qari (reciter of the Quran) by profession, the killer said he caught his wife having sex with another Qari. Based on current Afghan criminal law, he defended his honour and will not serve more than two years in prison.

Civilian casualties continued to grow in May. On the 19th, eleven members of one family, including a 7-month-old baby were killed in a roadside explosion in Logar province. The family had been on their way to a wedding when their vehicle hit a roadside mine. On the 26th, a roadside bomb in Herat killed at least ten civilians.

Humanitarian and Development

On the 17th, the United States Agency for International Development announced it would contribute \$20 million to the UN World Food Programme, aiming to enhance food and nutrition for 3.4 million vulnerable Afghans in 250 districts.

On the 18th, President Ghani commenced the construction of a 178 kilometre road that will connect Samangan province to Bamiyan. It is the second phase of the National North-South Corridor; the road will cut through more than 37 villages. President Ghani said the project is a key step towards "balanced development" and will make Bamiyan the heart of Afghanistan.

On the 21st, unknown gunmen attacked the guesthouse of Operation Mercy, a Swedish NGO in Kabul. They killed an Afghan guard and a German woman and kidnapped a Finnish woman.

People and Culture

On the 20th, Zan TV (Women's TV) was launched in Kabul. Dedicated to women's issues, the TV boasts an all-female cadre of presenters and producers. Though female newsreaders appear regularly on many Afghan channels, an entire station for women is a novelty and a sign of positive and gradual change.

Aryana Sayeed, an Afghan female singer and television personality publicly burned a skin-coloured dress, after religious figures and members of the public criticised her for wearing it during a recent concert in Paris. Sayeed said she burned the outfit so that people could focus on the more important problems of the country.

Shaesta Waiz, a 29-year-old Afghan American pilot made headlines after announcing that she will undertake a round-the-world flight. The International Civil Aviation Organization will sponsor it, and she will fly a route that is approximately 25,800km and will take her to more than eighteen countries - including Spain, Egypt, India, Singapore and Australia -

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before ending the trip back in Florida in August. During her 30 stopovers, Waiz will host events to engage school children in science, notably aeronautics.