



## Afghanistan in October 2016

### Politics

On 5<sup>th</sup> October, the National Unity Government (NUG) and European Union (EU) co-hosted the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan. Bringing together over 75 countries and 26 international organisations, the government presented its reform programme for the next four years. Donor countries pledged continued political and financial support, with the total sum of \$15.2 billion exceeding earlier expectations. In the official participants' communiqué, the NUG and international community reiterated their joint commitment and continuing cooperation in achieving Afghan self-reliance as part of the so-called 'transformation decade'. Nevertheless, during the conference two Afghan civil society representatives delivered an official statement, reminding the NUG and donors that accountability in aid spending was ultimately to the Afghan people. The conference was preceded on the 4<sup>th</sup> by two high-level side events on women's empowerment and regional economic cooperation, in addition to an Afghan and International Civil Society Workshop on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Overshadowing many Brussels Conference discussions, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> the NUG and EU signed a treaty on migration issues called the 'Joint Way Forward'. With record numbers of Afghan-origin migrants and refugees in EU member states for the past two years, the agreement outlined policy and procedures to repatriate those whose applications for asylum are rejected. Although no figures were made explicit, the inclusion of a proposal for a new terminal at Kabul airport to manage and process arrivals indicated that the number of repatriations from the EU is expected to be substantial. Human rights groups, both international and Afghan, criticised the deal. They highlighted ongoing insecurity and humanitarian crises in several regions, as well as current difficulties supporting the high level of returnees already seen this year from neighbouring countries such as Pakistan. In light of this, the civil society statement at the Brussels Conference called for the suspension of EU deportations.

Ongoing divisions within the NUG were highlighted by Vice President Dostum in a statement to the press on the 24<sup>th</sup>. He accused both the President and CEO of favouring their ethnic counterparts and singled out the alleged influence of President Ghani's closest Pashtun advisors stating, "if they say the milk is black, the president says the milk is black". The Presidential Office condemned Dostum's claims, saying they contravened the Vice President's position of authority at a time when the country faces increasing challenges.

### Peace and Security

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> the Taliban launched an attack on the city of Kunduz. Echoing similar events from October last year, the insurgents once again managed to seize key strategic posts and forced nearly 40,000 local residents to flee violent fighting. Although driven from the city centre the following day by Afghan Special Forces and US airstrikes, armed conflict between both sides continued in the surrounding area for over a week. Elsewhere in the country, Taliban fighting threatened major urban areas in the provinces of Helmand, Farah, Uruzgan, Jawzjan and Faryab. US airstrikes and advisors continued to support the Afghan security forces' operations against insurgent groups throughout the month, most notably on the 26<sup>th</sup> when the Pentagon confirmed the assassination of two senior Al-Qaeda leaders in Kunar.

Media reports emerged on the 18<sup>th</sup> that secret talks between senior NUG and Taliban representatives had been taking place in Qatar, as recently as early October. If true, this would mark the first official contact of its kind following the breakdown of the Pakistan-brokered negotiations last year. Meanwhile, President Ghani issued a presidential decree on the 21<sup>st</sup> which created a six-member commission to oversee the implementation of the Hizb-e-Islami peace deal signed last month. As media and political analysts began to reflect on future roles for the group and its leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, calls from the Afghanistan

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Independent Human Rights Commission for the group to issue a formal apology to past victims remain unheeded.

Civilians continued to bear the brunt of deadly terrorist attacks across Afghanistan this month. On the eve of Ashura – one of the most important holidays of the Shi'ite calendar – an attack on the Sakhi shrine in Kabul saw 18 killed and 54 wounded. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, over 30 civilians were kidnapped and killed in Ghor province by armed insurgents claiming allegiance to Islamic State.

## **Rights**

On the 16<sup>th</sup>, President Ghani issued a decree aiming to expedite implementation of the law on access to information. Although ratified in 2014, many have voiced concerns regarding the availability of public information and willingness of government officials to provide it to the media and other relevant agencies. However, despite these moves to improve freedom of information, 2016 continued to be the most dangerous year since 2001 for journalists. On the same day as Ghani's decree, a senior reporter for the state-run Radio Television Afghanistan was shot dead by unknown armed men in the western province of Zabol. Yaqub Sharafat was the eleventh journalist to be killed this year and his murder provoked the Afghan Independent Journalists Association to demand immediate action from the NUG in ensuring greater protection for journalists across the country.

In the first case of its kind, a member of the Afghan security forces is currently under investigation for child abuse. An incident took place earlier this month at a school in Paktika province, where several students were allegedly injured and one forced to undress as part of a humiliation ritual. Following local outcry and school closures in protest, the Ministry of Defence confirmed the arrest of the accused perpetrator.

## **Humanitarian and Development**

The UN Office for Drugs and Crime released its annual findings on opium production. It found a 43% increase compared to 2015 and attributed this trend to improved farming conditions over the past year. It also reported that 93% of cultivation is currently found in the most insecure districts in the south, east and west provinces. Due to the lack of access in Taliban-controlled areas, local authorities have only been able to eradicate 355 hectares of poppy field this year, a stark decrease in comparison to past figures.

Following the impressive pledges seen at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, donors will soon have to deliver formal bilateral commitments of assistance. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the US Agency for International Development and the Afghan Ministry of Finance signed agreements obligating \$791.16 million to support development programmes, aimed at strengthening the private sector and improving state service provision in both education and healthcare. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, the World Bank approved \$120 million in grants as part of its 2017-2020 Country Partnership Framework.

Afghan saffron has for the third year in a row been rated the best in the world by the International Taste and Quality Institute in Brussels. To coincide with the announcement President Ghani ratified a 5-year development strategy for the valuable saffron industry, aiming to ensure its unique quality continues to attract and profit from new foreign markets and investors.

## **People and Culture**

The fourth annual International Women's Film Festival took place in Kabul. The only festival of its kind in the region, this year it hosted over 200 domestic and international films with a focus on women's rights. Its opening ceremony on the 19<sup>th</sup> was attended by many prominent female filmmakers, actors, activists and cinema enthusiasts.

To celebrate International Day of the Girl Child, the Afghan National Institute of Music composed a new dedicated 'daughters' anthem. It was performed by a young choir as part of official celebrations in Kabul on the 11<sup>th</sup>. In Herat a UN-backed arts event, attended by over 60 NUG and civil society representatives, highlighted the impact of armed conflict on the rights of Afghan girls.

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