

# **Business and Politics in the Muslim World**

## **Afghanistan This Week**

Report Number: 112

Week 21- 27 March 2010

March, 30, 2010

**Mohammad Amin**

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### CONTENTS

<b>POLITICAL HEADLINES SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>3</b>
AFGHAN BOMB ATTACKS KILL AT LEAST 12 CIVILIANS.....	3
AFGHANS SAY IRAN ARMING TALIBAN, INDIA IN A FIX .....	3
MILITANT GROUP IN KABUL WITH DRAFT PEACE DEAL.....	3
BAGRAM PRISON IN AFGHANISTAN MAY BECOME THE NEW GUANTÁNAMO.....	3
AFGHAN CHILDREN FACE WORLD'S WORST CONDITIONS - U.N.....	3
KARZAI HOLDS PEACE TALKS WITH MILITANTS .....	3
BEIJING-BOUND KARZAI SEEKS CHINA HELP IN PEACE PUSH .....	3
HEKMATYAR'S 'PEACE PLAN' CALLS FOR NATO WITHDRAWAL BY 2011 .....	4
MARJAH: GUNS QUIET, THE BATTLE FOR POWER NOW BEGINS .....	4
HIZB-I-ISLAMI DELEGATION TO MEET WITH UN .....	4
TWO NATO SOLDIERS, FIVE AFGHANS KILLED IN UNREST.....	4
CHINA, AFGHANISTAN PLAN CLOSER PARTNERSHIP AS KARZAI CONCLUDES STATE VISIT.....	4
<b>SOCIAL HEADLINES SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
AFGHAN OFFICIAL: AT LEAST 35 DIE IN AVALANCHE .....	4
KARZAI VISITS CHINA WITH MINISTERS, NATURAL GAS DEVELOPMENT PLANS .....	5
AFGHANS CELEBRATE NEW YEAR WITH HOPES FOR PEACE .....	5
AFGHAN DRUG CARTELS SQUEEZE POPPY FARMERS .....	5
BLASPHEMOUS JOURNALIST FREED .....	5
<b>ECONOMICAL HEADLINES SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>5</b>
CHINA, AFGHANISTAN FORGE CLOSER ECONOMIC TIES AS NEW AGREEMENTS ARE SIGNED.....	5
AFGHANISTAN BOOSTS BUDGET REVENUE BY 45 PERCENT.....	5
<b>POLITICAL HEADLINES .....</b>	<b>6</b>
AFGHAN BOMB ATTACKS KILL AT LEAST 12 CIVILIANS.....	6
AFGHANS SAY IRAN ARMING TALIBAN, INDIA IN A FIX .....	7
MILITANT GROUP IN KABUL WITH DRAFT PEACE DEAL.....	8
BAGRAM PRISON IN AFGHANISTAN MAY BECOME THE NEW GUANTÁNAMO.....	10
AFGHAN CHILDREN FACE WORLD'S WORST CONDITIONS - U.N.....	11
KARZAI HOLDS PEACE TALKS WITH MILITANTS .....	13
BEIJING-BOUND KARZAI SEEKS CHINA HELP IN PEACE PUSH .....	15
HEKMATYAR'S 'PEACE PLAN' CALLS FOR NATO WITHDRAWAL BY 2011 .....	17
MARJAH: GUNS QUIET, THE BATTLE FOR POWER NOW BEGINS .....	19
HIZB-I-ISLAMI DELEGATION TO MEET WITH UN .....	22

TWO NATO SOLDIERS, FIVE AFGHANS KILLED IN UNREST .....	24
CHINA, AFGHANISTAN PLAN CLOSER PARTNERSHIP AS KARZAI CONCLUDES STATE VISIT.....	25
<b>SOCIAL HEADLINES .....</b>	<b>27</b>
AFGHAN OFFICIAL: AT LEAST 35 DIE IN AVALANCHE .....	27
KARZAI VISITS CHINA WITH MINISTERS, NATURAL GAS DEVELOPMENT PLANS .....	27
AFGHANS CELEBRATE NEW YEAR WITH HOPES FOR PEACE .....	28
AFGHAN DRUG CARTELS SQUEEZE POPPY FARMERS .....	30
BLASPHEMOUS JOURNALIST FREED .....	33
<b>ECONOMICAL HEADLINES .....</b>	<b>35</b>
CHINA, AFGHANISTAN FORGE CLOSER ECONOMIC TIES AS NEW AGREEMENTS ARE SIGNED.....	35
AFGHANISTAN BOOSTS BUDGET REVENUE BY 45 PERCENT.....	36

## **Political Headlines Summary**

### **Afghan bomb attacks kill at least 12 civilians**

LASHKAR GAH - A suicide bomber killed 10 civilians on Sunday when he detonated his explosives near a crowd in southern Afghanistan, while a roadside bomb in the east killed two others, officials said.

### **Afghans say Iran arming Taliban, India in a fix**

NEW DELHI - Even before India's efforts to engage Pakistan on the Afghanistan issue could gain momentum, claims by Afghan agencies that Iran was secretly helping the Taliban have further compounded India's concerns.

### **Militant group in Kabul with draft peace deal**

KABUL -- Thirteen Afghan civilians died in violence Sunday as the nation's hard-line vice president expressed hopes for reconciliation and representatives of a militant group with ties to the Taliban brought their own draft of a peace deal to the capital.

### **Bagram prison in Afghanistan may become the new Guantánamo**

The American detention centre at Bagram in Afghanistan could be expanded into a Guantánamo-style prison for terrorist suspects detained around the world.

### **Afghan children face world's worst conditions - U.N.**

HERAT - Afghanistan is the hardest place in the world to be a child, the South Asia regional director for UNICEF said, with high child mortality rates, poor levels of nutrition and rampant sexual abuse.

### **Karzai Holds Peace Talks With Militants**

KABUL - Afghan President Hamid Karzai has met a senior delegation for peace talks with one of the main insurgent groups fighting against his government and foreign troops, Karzai's spokesman said on Monday.

### **Beijing-bound Karzai seeks China help in peace push**

BEIJING - Afghan President Hamid Karzai will ask China to use its diplomatic clout to help rein in a growing insurgency when he arrives for a state visit on Tuesday, putting security concerns ahead of his economic wishlist.

## **Hekmatyar's 'peace plan' calls for NATO withdrawal by 2011**

The leader of one of the top three factions fueling the Afghan insurgency has sent a delegation to Kabul to conduct peace negotiations with President Hamid Karzai's government.

## **Marjah: Guns quiet, the battle for power now begins**

Lashkar Gah - Weeks after a major United States-led offensive overturned Taliban rule in the southern Afghan town of Marjah, another force continues to hold sway over the population.

## **Hizb-i-Islami delegation to meet with UN**

KABUL - Representatives of a militant group linked to an infamous Afghan warlord are hoping to convince U.N. officials Thursday that it's the right time for a peace deal with insurgents.

## **Two NATO soldiers, five Afghans killed in unrest**

KABUL — Two NATO soldiers and two Afghan mine clearers have been killed in bombings in southern Afghanistan, while three policemen died in a clash with Taliban fighters, officials and NATO said Wednesday.

## **China, Afghanistan plan closer partnership as Karzai concludes state visit**

Afghan President Hamid Karzai on Thursday concluded a three-day state visit to China during which deals on aid, tax reduction and training were inked to cement bilateral comprehensive cooperation.

## **Social Headlines Summary**

### **Afghan official: At least 35 die in avalanche**

KABUL – The bodies of 30 people were recovered Tuesday from the site of avalanche in a remote area of northeastern Afghanistan, a police official said.

### **Karzai Visits China With Ministers, Natural Gas Development Plans**

KABUL - Afghan President Hamid Karzai is traveling to Beijing today with a government delegation that includes the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, mines, and investment.

### **Afghans celebrate new year with hopes for peace**

MAZAR-I-SHARIF - Afghans have travelled from across their war-ravaged country to the northern city of Mazar-I-Sharif united behind one wish: that the advent of the new year will bring them peace.

### **Afghan drug cartels squeeze poppy farmers**

LASHKAR GAH - Like farmers the world over Haji Afzal has locked in the price for his crop with a forward contract.

### **Blasphemous journalist freed**

KABUL - An Afghan journalist, sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment for allegedly committing blasphemy, has been released after spending two and half years in jail.

## **Economical Headlines Summary**

### **China, Afghanistan forge closer economic ties as new agreements are signed**

China and Afghanistan took new steps Wednesday to further strengthen economic and trade links as new agreements were inked regarding aid, tax reduction and training.

### **Afghanistan boosts budget revenue by 45 percent**

KABUL - Afghanistan's state revenues rose by 45 percent last year, but still only account for less than a third of the budget in a country that remains dependent on Western aid, the finance ministry said on Thursday.

# Political Headlines

## Afghan bomb attacks kill at least 12 civilians

Reuters

03/21/2010

By Abdul Malek

LASHKAR GAH - A suicide bomber killed 10 civilians on Sunday when he detonated his explosives near a crowd in southern Afghanistan, while a roadside bomb in the east killed two others, officials said.

Violence in Afghanistan has surged, with 2009 being the worst year since U.S.-backed Afghan forces overthrew the Taliban in 2001. More than 2,400 civilians were killed last year, a 14 percent rise on 2008, the United Nations said.

In the first incident, a suicide bomber driving a three-wheeled rickshaw detonated his explosives near a crowd who were holding a picnic for the Afghan New Year in Gereshk district of Helmand province, the provincial governor's spokesman said.

"The target was an Afghan Army vehicle. The first reports are that 10 civilians have been killed and seven more wounded," said spokesman Daoud Ahmadi, adding the bomb missed its target.

A witness at the scene told Reuters by telephone he had been no more than 50 meters away from the blast.

"The bomber was driving a rickshaw and was targeting an army vehicle. When the soldiers saw the rickshaw they sped up. The bomb exploded in a crowded area where many people were having picnics," said Khan Mohammad.

"Many people have been killed and wounded," he said.

A spokesman for NATO-led forces in Kabul said none of its forces were killed or wounded in the attack, but that foreign troops were now in the area assessing the situation.

In February, thousands of U.S. Marines launched an assault in Marjah, another part of Helmand, which had been under the insurgents' control. The operation was described as the biggest offensive of the eight-year war.

There are some 120,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan and that is set to rise to nearly 150,000 by the end of this year as Washington sends in more troops as part of a new

strategy to try and quell the mounting violence.

Separately, in Khost province in the southeast of the country, a roadside bomb killed two Afghan civilians and wounded four, a senior police chief said.

"A civilian car hit a roadside bomb on the outskirts of Khost city. Two civilians were killed and four wounded," acting provincial police chief Mohammad Yaqoub Mandozai told Reuters.

## **Afghans say Iran arming Taliban, India in a fix**

**Times of India**

**03/21/2010**

**By**

NEW DELHI - Even before India's efforts to engage Pakistan on the Afghanistan issue could gain momentum, claims by Afghan agencies that Iran was secretly helping the Taliban have further compounded India's concerns.

The disclosure that Iran was supplying weapons to the Taliban, accompanied by "evidence" in the form of seizure of arms in Herat, comes just ahead of foreign minister S M Krishna's crucial visit to Tehran.

Iran is one of the few countries which has repeatedly said that it doesn't believe there is any good Taliban, something which has encouraged India to reach out to Tehran for keeping Taliban out of any major role in the Kabul government in the event of a reconciliation.

Iran has denied helping the Taliban after Afghan border police chief Rahmatullah Safi displayed the arms seized in Herat saying that these were manufactured in Iran.

While officials said that India would still go by Iran's official position, they admitted there were concerns because the US too in the past has accused Iran of playing a "double game" in Afghanistan.

Earlier this month, American defence secretary Robert Gates had accused Tehran of helping the Taliban in its attempts to undermine the work being done by the Nato forces. Later, however, he said that Iran's influence with the Taliban was limited.



## **Militant group in Kabul with draft peace deal**

**The Washington Post**

**03/21/2010**

KABUL -- Thirteen Afghan civilians died in violence Sunday as the nation's hard-line vice president expressed hopes for reconciliation and representatives of a militant group with ties to the Taliban brought their own draft of a peace deal to the capital.

Talk of reconciling with insurgents has done little to slow the fighting across Afghanistan, yet the issue is gaining steam, partly fueled by a "peace jirga" that Afghan President Hamid Karzai will host in late April or early May.

The Afghan government and others from the international community have had secret contacts with the Taliban, or their representatives at the same time that thousands of U.S. and NATO reinforcements are streaming into the country to slow the insurgency.

Helmand province in southern Afghanistan was the scene of Sunday's deadliest violence. A suicide bomber killed 10 civilians and wounded seven others when he detonated his explosives near an Afghan army patrol at a bridge in Gereshk.

In eastern Afghanistan, two civilians died when a roadside bomb exploded near a crowd celebrating the Afghan new year in Khost province. And in Wardak province, NATO said an elderly man was shot and killed by a joint Afghan-international force that mistakenly believed he was a threat.

Also, NATO said two rockets landed Sunday around the military complex at Kabul airport. A third landed nearby and a fourth hit in the eastern part of the capital. There were no initial reports of casualties.

Besides working on ways to reconcile with the Taliban's top leaders, the Afghan government is finalizing a plan to use economic incentives to coax low- and mid-level insurgent fighters off the battlefield. Pakistan, Iran and other international players, meanwhile, have begun staking out positions on possible reconciliation negotiations that could mean an endgame to the 8-year-old war.

Harun Zarghun, chief spokesman for Hizb-i-Islami, said a five-member delegation was in Kabul to meet with government officials and also plans to meet with Taliban leaders somewhere in Afghanistan. The group, which has longtime ties to al-Qaida, was founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former prime minister and rebel commander in the war against the Soviets in the 1980s.

Spokesmen for the Karzai government could not be reached for comment.

Khalid Farooqi, a member of the parliament from Paktika province, said one delegation from Hizb-i-Islami arrived 10 days ago, and a second one, including Qutbuddin Halal, a

powerful figure in the group, came on Saturday.

Zarghun, the group's spokesman in Pakistan, said the delegation is carrying a 15-point plan that calls for foreign forces to start pulling out in July - a full year ahead of President Barack Obama's desire to start withdrawing U.S. forces in July 2011.

The plan also calls for the current Afghan parliament to serve through December. After that, the parliament would be replaced by an interim government, or shura, which would hold local and national elections within a year, according to the plan. Zarghun said a new Afghan constitution would be written, merging the current version with ones used earlier.

A spokesman for Hekmatyar, Wali Ullah, said Hizb-i-Islami has never refused to join in peace talks, under certain conditions. "The main condition is the empowerment of President Karzai to engage in talks and make decisions," he said. "The aggressive occupying forces should also announce a schedule for leaving Afghanistan."

Earlier this month, Hizb-i-Islami fighters battled the Taliban with rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns in Baghlan province. It was not immediately clear whether the clashes were a localized militant dispute or represented signs of a rift between Hekmatyar and the Taliban. But dozens of Hizb-i-Islami fighters, under pressure from the Taliban, ended up joining government forces that had amassed on the edge of the battle zone.

In the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif to mark the Afghan new year, hard-line Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim expressed hope that the upcoming peace jirga will lay a foundation for peace with insurgents.

"The government will try to find a peaceful life for those Afghans who are unhappy," Fahim, who fought the Soviets and commanded forces that overthrew the Taliban in 2001, told thousands who flocked to a shrine.

Without mentioning the Taliban by name, Fahim said, "God willing, by the help of the people, we will have a successful, historic jirga. ... My dear countrymen, my hope is that this year will be the year of peaceful stability."

Fahim, who has been critical in the past of deals with the Taliban, is an ethnic Tajik and former defense minister, while Karzai and the Taliban leadership are ethnic Pashtuns.

During his speech to the crowd, Balkh provincial Gov. Atta Mohammad Noor also expressed support for reconciliation and stressed the need for input from Afghans across all ethnic factions and regions, especially those who have "been damaged by fighting from both sides."

Reconciliation cannot set back democracy or women's rights, he said.

"People without participation of people has no meaning," Noor said later. "If the people

participate or share in this process, then there is no doubt the war machine of the Taliban will get weak."

Noor said Pakistan appeared to be meddling in possible peace efforts with insurgents when it recently arrested the Taliban's No. 2 and other members of the insurgency in Pakistan. "The people who were arrested were the people who met with the government," Noor said.

The U.N.'s former envoy to Afghanistan, Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide, has criticized Pakistan, saying that he and other U.N. officials had been in discussions with senior Taliban officials since last year, but the arrests halted the dialogue. Eide said the Pakistanis surely knew the roles these figures had in efforts to find a political settlement. Pakistan denies the arrests were linked to reconciliation talks.

## **Bagram prison in Afghanistan may become the new Guantánamo**

**The Times**

**03/21/2010**

**By Michael Evans, Pentagon Correspondent**

The American detention centre at Bagram in Afghanistan could be expanded into a Guantánamo-style prison for terrorist suspects detained around the world.

This is one of the options being considered as US officials try to find an alternative to Guantánamo Bay, which President Obama promised to close within a year of taking office. The continued use of the prison in Cuba has presented Mr Obama with an embarrassing dilemma because of the difficulty of finding somewhere acceptable to imprison those considered to be the most dangerous detainees.

A decision to send al-Qaeda suspects detained in countries such as Yemen and Somalia to Bagram, which is located north of Kabul, would be highly controversial.

General Stanley McChrystal, the American commander in Afghanistan, has already voiced his opposition, according to the Los Angeles Times newspaper, because of the negative publicity it would generate.

Bagram is synonymous in Afghan eyes with past human rights abuses, although the old prison has been replaced by a new facility at the large US airbase.

A senior Pentagon official said: "No one particularly likes any of the choices before us right now, but Bagram may be the least bad among them."

The other alternative — of using a special prison in the US — is seen as less practical

because the detainees would have to be put through the American justice system, and some of the suspects considered by the US as the most dangerous would be difficult to prosecute because of the lack of sufficient evidence. Congress would also oppose such a move.

Bagram currently houses about 800 detainees, including a small number of foreign fighters who were not arrested in Afghanistan. They were taken there under the Administration of George W. Bush.

The other complication for Mr Obama is that, under current plans, Bagram is to be handed over to the Afghan Government next year, so unless the US military retained control over one section of the prison — solely for suspects detained outside of Afghanistan — it is unlikely that the Government of President Karzai would approve of having responsibility for those detained by US special forces or the CIA in another part of the world.

A US official told the Los Angeles Times that General McChrystal supported the idea of Bagram being used for foreign fighters detained in Pakistan, provided they had a direct bearing “on the fight in Afghanistan”. That would include Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the alleged Taliban leader captured in Pakistan in February.

The issue of where to put high-risk detainees is so sensitive that when Admiral Eric Olson, commander of US Special Operations Command, was asked at a Senate hearing last week where he would send a terrorist suspect arrested in Yemen, he said that he could answer that question only in closed session.

## **Afghan children face world's worst conditions - U.N.**

**Reuters**

**03/22/2010**

**By Jonathon Burch**

### **More than a quarter of Afghan children—257 out of 1,000—will die before they reach their fifth birthday**

HERAT - Afghanistan is the hardest place in the world to be a child, the South Asia regional director for UNICEF said, with high child mortality rates, poor levels of nutrition and rampant sexual abuse.

"The situation in Afghanistan as a whole is one of the most dramatic in South Asia and also in the world. Afghanistan is the most difficult place to be born as a child," Daniel Toole said on a visit to Afghanistan this week.

"If I could take one challenge, it's survival."

Three decades of war and a worsening insurgency have made it ever tougher for an Afghan child just to survive, Toole told Reuters during a visit aimed at highlighting what UNICEF calls the worst conditions for children on earth.

One of the girls he had just met in a woman's shelter was only nine years old when she was forced to marry a total stranger. Another was just 11.

More than a quarter of Afghan children -- 257 out of 1,000 -- will die before they reach their fifth birthday and 165 out of every 1,000 will die in the first year of their lives, more than any place in the world, according to UNICEF data from 2008.

Afghanistan also has the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world after Sierra Leone, with 1,800 women per 100,000 live births dying during child birth, according to UNICEF estimates from 2005.

"On top of that, we overlay the conflict, and so children are being displaced, their food production has been disrupted, so the chances of being yet further endangered by the security situation ... make it that much more dramatic," said Toole.

#### "DRAMATIC STORIES, PAINFUL STORIES"

Violence in Afghanistan is at its worst levels since a U.S.-led invasion in late 2001 overthrew the Taliban. Since then, intense fighting between insurgents and foreign and Afghan troops has forced thousands of civilians to flee their homes.

An increasing number of children are also fleeing across Afghanistan's borders, said Toole, with many turning up as far away as Western Europe without their parents.

Last April, 24 Afghan children aged between 14 and 16 were found living on a sidewalk of a railway station in Rome. The Save the Children aid group said Afghan children now made up one of the biggest groups of unaccompanied minors in the city.

Other major problems facing children in Afghanistan, particularly girls, said Toole, is underage marriage and sexual abuse. Forty-three percent of girls aged 20-24 were married before they were 18, according to UNICEF figures from 2009.

Girls are often married against their will to men more than twice their age and are forced to have sex with their husbands before they reach puberty.

Toole described a visit he made to a women's shelter supported by UNICEF in the western city of Herat. The shelter is the only place in the city where girls who have been sexually abused or married at a young age can seek refuge.

"Two young girls, one who was nine who was married. She didn't even know she was being married until she arrived and was told, 'here is your husband'. Another married at 11 against her will," said Toole after meeting the girls at the shelter.

"Dramatic stories, painful stories, but I think it's the tip of the iceberg. I found myself thinking, 'how many girls have had this happen and and can't get to this centre?'," he said. But despite the difficulties facing Afghan children, Toole said progress was being made, especially in education with an increasing number of girls being sent to school. "There is a lot of improvement but there is still so much more to do here, even if I just think about survival," Toole said.

## **Karzai Holds Peace Talks With Militants**

**Reuters**  
**03/22/2010**

KABUL - Afghan President Hamid Karzai has met a senior delegation for peace talks with one of the main insurgent groups fighting against his government and foreign troops, Karzai's spokesman said on Monday.

Although the talks with delegates from the Hezb-i-Islami group appeared to be preliminary, it was Karzai's first confirmed direct contact with the faction and could signal prospects for a separate peace with a group that rivals the Taliban.

"I can confirm that a delegation of Hezb-i-Islami ... is in Kabul with a plan and has met with the president," Karzai's spokesman, Waheed Omer, said.

A spokesman for Hezb-i-Islami said it was the first time the group had sent senior envoys to Kabul for peace talks. They had brought a 15-point peace plan which includes a demand for withdrawal of foreign troops, said Haroun Zarghoun, spokesman for the group's fugitive leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami has shared some of the aims of the Taliban, but has led a separate insurgency mainly in the east and pockets of the north of the country. In recent months Taliban fighters have pushed into Hezb-i-Islami strongholds, leading to clashes between fighters from the two groups.

The delegation is led by Qutbuddin Helal, a former prime minister and deputy to Hekmatyar, and also includes Hekmatyar's son-in-law, Zarghoun said.

"The main point of the plan is the withdrawal of all foreign forces from July this year, and that this is to be completed within six months," Zarghoun told Reuters on a mobile

phone with a Pakistan number.

"The current government and parliament are to function until a provisional administration is formed after six months, and presidential and parliamentary polls are held in March 2011," he said, adding that details of the plan were negotiable.

Karzai has launched a high profile effort to reach out to insurgents this year, and included a former Hezb-i-Islami member as the economy minister in his new cabinet in January.

Zarghoun said the delegation might also meet U.S. officials to discuss the plan, however U.S. embassy spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden said the United States had no plans to meet them.

"The U.S. does support the Afghan government's interest in reaching out to members of insurgent groups that cease support to the insurgency, live in accordance with the Afghan constitution, renounce violence and have no ties to al Qaeda or terrorist groups that share its objectives," she said.

Washington, which has the bulk of the 120,000 international troops in Afghanistan, has been cautious about Karzai's efforts to reach out to senior militants.

#### TROOPS INCREASE

The United States is in the process of increasing its forces in Afghanistan this year but has already announced plans to begin withdrawing in mid-2011. Western governments and Karzai hope an outreach program combined with a year of stepped-up military pressure will persuade insurgents to lay down their arms.

The former head of the United Nations mission in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, confirmed last week that he had held talks with Taliban representatives over the past year. He said those talks ended in recent weeks after Pakistan arrested the Afghan Taliban's number two leader, Abdul Ghani Baradar.

Hezb-i-Islami is one of the three groups that NATO forces recognize as the main insurgent factions, led by Hekmatyar, a veteran anti-Soviet guerrilla commander, civil war faction leader and former prime minister.

Hekmatyar's Islamist fighters have long fought NATO and Afghan government forces in the east and in pockets in the north.

Like Karzai, Hekmatyar is an ethnic Pashtun, the traditional rulers of Afghanistan which makes up the bulk of the insurgency against the foreign forces. Hekmatyar is known for repeatedly shifting alliances over three decades of war.

The group has in the past claimed to share some aims with the Taliban, but has remained separate, even as growing Taliban influence has spread to Hezb-i-Islami areas.

Earlier this month, the government said scores of Hezb-i-Islami fighters in a northern district had surrendered after clashing with Taliban guerrillas over control of villages.

## **Beijing-bound Karzai seeks China help in peace push**

**Reuters**

**03/22/2010**

**By Emma Graham-Harrison**

BEIJING - Afghan President Hamid Karzai will ask China to use its diplomatic clout to help rein in a growing insurgency when he arrives for a state visit on Tuesday, putting security concerns ahead of his economic wishlist.

Aid, trade and drug trafficking will also be on the agenda for Karzai's fourth visit to Beijing since taking the reins of power more than eight years ago. But with violence at its highest level since the U.S.-backed ouster of the Taliban in 2001, his main focus is on a new diplomatic push to end the fighting.

Karzai, who will meet Premier Wen Jiabao and President Hu Jintao, is trying to muster international support for peace talks with the Taliban and other insurgents. He wants China to weigh in with its ally, Pakistan, a vital regional player.

"The main goal is to ask China, as a close friend to Pakistan, to take part in a solution to the problems in Afghanistan," said a source with knowledge of Karzai's agenda.

Karzai has launched a high-profile effort this year to reach out to insurgents for talks, which took a step forward with the announcement on Monday that he had met a delegation from Hezb-i-Islami, one of the main insurgent factions.

Some Afghan and international diplomats fear Pakistan is interfering in efforts to start peace talks with the Taliban because it wants a bigger role in negotiations. Islamabad also worries Karzai is too close to rival India.

"That is one of the primary things he is doing in Beijing, insofar as it is possible. He is trying to shore up his relationship with Pakistan, and China's help is useful," said Andrew Small, a China and South Asia expert at the German Marshall Fund of the United States think-tank.

China could benefit from a more peaceful Afghanistan as its firms would find it easier to complete multi-billion dollar resource deals they have secured or are eyeing. It would cut the threat of violence in its largely Muslim northwest Xinjiang region, and possibly curb



a flow of heroin into the country.

But Chinese experts say Beijing is reluctant to get any more involved in a country that has proven a quagmire for outsiders for centuries, and is now bogging down U.S. and NATO troops.

It is even less keen to meddle via Pakistan, a staunch ally which it has long supplied with finance and arms.

"China is not going to put any pressure on Pakistan; problems between (Kabul and Islamabad) are for them to sort out. Pakistan is not a province of China," said Zhao Gancheng, director for South Asia at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies.

"This affects Pakistan's own fundamental interests so no country can affect it ... The U.S. is constantly trying to put more pressure on them to tackle this issue and it has no effect."

WAIT AND SEE

Afghanistan is heavily dependent on international aid, but its government hopes the vast reserves of minerals will provide the key to eventual financial independence.

Its copper and iron are attractive to resource-hungry China, and two Chinese firms have committed to a \$4 billion investment in the vast Aynak copper mine, south of Kabul, with production slated to start in 3 or 4 years.

Yet work on the project is progressing slower than expected.

Challenging conditions may have slowed the project but China is also happy to await the result of a surge in U.S. troops and other new policies aimed at curbing the insurgency.

"If things get better, China will step up investment, but if things don't, they will have to start withdrawing because without security, what kind of investment can you have?" said Zhao.

"I can only say that we must have a 'wait and see' attitude."

One issue that is a more urgent concern for Beijing is the flow of Afghan heroin into the country, even if little comes directly across the short and high-altitude border the two share.

Two Afghans were recently executed for bringing heroin into China, an Afghan source with knowledge of the case said. Their unreported deaths came days after a Briton, Akmal Shaikh, was put to death for the same crime, drawing a blaze of publicity because the UK government had called for clemency.

## **Hekmatyar's 'peace plan' calls for NATO withdrawal by 2011**

**Long War Journal**

**03/23/2010**

**By Bill Roggio**

The leader of one of the top three factions fueling the Afghan insurgency has sent a delegation to Kabul to conduct peace negotiations with President Hamid Karzai's government.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of a splinter faction of the Hezb-i-Islami, sent a five-man delegation "to discuss Hezb-i-Islami's agenda on how to bring durable peace to Afghanistan," Haroon Zarghoon, a spokesman for the group told The Wall Street Journal.

Hekmatyar sent Qutbuddin Helal, a former Afghan prime minister and the deputy leader of Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin, to conduct the talks and present the 15-point proposal for peace.

The 15-point proposal was first released on Feb. 21; the text was printed by the Frontier Post [see below for the full text]. The plan calls for a full withdrawal of NATO and allied troops by the end of 2010, a withdrawal of those forces from cities to remote bases in the interim, and a full turnover of security to the Afghan Army and police. "Foreign troops will have no rights to carry out military operations, house search and arrests on their own anywhere in Afghanistan," the statement read.

Al Qaeda and other foreign jihadist groups would not be required to leave Afghanistan until after a full NATO withdrawal. "Foreign fighters will not stay in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign troops."

The HIG plan calls for the formation of a seven-man security council "with the consensus of all Afghan factions which will have the power to take final decisions on key issues." Elections would be held in March 2011.

A similar offer was made by Hekmatyar in December 2009 in a statement released for Eid.

Hekmatyar is a notorious opportunist who has ties with al Qaeda, Iran, and Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment.

Hekmatyar was a key player in the Soviet-Afghan war and led one of the biggest insurgent factions against Soviet and Afghan communist forces. But Hekmatyar's brutal battlefield tactics and wanton destruction of Kabul following the collapse of the Afghan Communist regime in the early 1990s led to the demise of his popularity. The Taliban overran his last stronghold south of Kabul in 1995 and forced him into exile in Iran from 1996-2002.

HIG forces have conducted attacks in northern and northeastern Afghanistan, and have bases in Pakistan's Swat Valley as well as in the tribal agencies of Bajaur, Mohmand, and North and South Waziristan.

Hekmatyar's forces, along with the Haqqani Network and the Quetta Shura, are the top three insurgent groups in Afghanistan. All have close ties to al Qaeda and other jihadist groups based in Pakistan and Central Asia.

In May 2006, Hekmatyar swore alliance to al Qaeda's top leader, Osama bin Laden. "We thank all Arab mujahideen, particularly Sheikh Osama Bin Laden, Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, and other leaders who helped us in our jihad against the Russians," he said in a recording broadcast by Al Jazeera.

"They fought our enemies and made dear sacrifices," Hekmatyar continued. "Neither we nor the future generations will forget this great favor. We beseech Almighty God to grant us success and help us fulfill our duty toward them and enable us to return their favor and reciprocate their support and sacrifices. We hope to take part with them in a battle which they will lead and raise its banner. We stand beside and support them."

Despite Hekmatyar's pledge to al Qaeda, senior US generals believe that he can be weaned from the insurgency and brought into the Afghan government. Major General Michael Flynn, the top intelligence official in Afghanistan, called both Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin "Haqqani" "absolutely salvageable" even if they currently support al Qaeda.

"The HIG already have members in Karzai's government, and it could evolve into a political party, even though Hekmatyar may be providing al Qaeda leaders refuge in Kunar," Flynn told The Atlantic. "Hekmatyar has reconcilable ambitions."

Sir Graeme Lamb, a senior adviser to General McChrystal, echoed Flynn's view on Hekmatyar and Haqqani, and discounted the groups' close ties to al Qaeda.

"Haqqani and Hekmatyar are pragmatists tied to the probability of outcomes," Lamb also told The Atlantic. "With all the talk of Islamic ideology, this is the land of the deal."

Full text of the Afghan peace proposal made by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

- 1): Foreign troops must start withdrawal in July this year and complete the process in six months.
- 2): They should quit main cities and populated area and move to military bases.
- 3): Security issues must be completely handed over to Afghan army and the police. Foreign troops will have no rights to carry out military operations, house search and arrests on their own anywhere in Afghanistan.
- 4): The parliament and the incumbent government will continue to function unless new elections are held and new government is formed. But those people should not be part of the government who are controversial and accused of corruption, war crimes and who

have secular ideas. And those people should not be in top military leadership who support a group against other.

5): A 7-member National Security Council will be formed with the consensus of all Afghan factions which will have the power to take final decisions on key issues. The Council's center will be in a province where security will be completely under Afghan forces and there will be no foreign troops there.

6): After the withdrawal of foreign troops, elections for the office of the President, National Assembly and provincial assemblies will be held simultaneously on proportional representation basis in (Afghan year 1390 Spring). (March 2011)

7): Cabinet members and governors can only be allowed to take part in the elections who resign three months before the polls.

8): Every party will get representation in the first elected government in accordance with their seats in the parliament and they will secure trust vote from the parliament. And the largest group will not be bound to form coalition government.

9): That Group or Alliance will have the right to take part in coming election which will secure up to 10 per cent votes in the first election.

10): During this period there will be complete ceasefire among the warring factions, all political prisoners will be freed, all sides will make commitment that they will not fight against rival faction and they will not use illegal channels to grab power.

11): The first elected parliament will have the right to review the constitution and to take a final decision about the constitution.

12): No foreign country will have the right to establish their jails in Afghanistan. They will not arrest or put on trial any Afghan national and will not take any Afghan for trial outside of the country.

13): Those accused of war crimes, drug smuggling, corruption and plundering national wealth will be tried in Islamic courts. No side will defend them covertly or overtly.

14): Foreign fighters will not stay in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign troops.

15): Any internal and external elements who are opposed to this agreement and insist on fighting, we all will jointly deal with the war mongers to save our homeland from their curse.

## **Marjah: Guns quiet, the battle for power now begins**

**The Christian Science Monitor**

**03/23/2010**

**By Anand Gopal**

**One month after a US-led offensive to clear the Taliban from Marjah, Afghanistan, locals are worried less about the insurgents returning to power than about a notorious former official seeking to join the new government.**

Lashkar Gah - Weeks after a major United States-led offensive overturned Taliban rule in the southern Afghan town of Marjah, another force continues to hold sway over the

population.

"We are ruled by fear now," says Gul Muhammad, a shopkeeper from the dust-caked market town, speaking by phone. "We don't know who will ultimately win here, or who will end up back in power."

Stuck between the Taliban, an untested new governor, and predatory former leaders trying to reclaim power, many of Marjah's residents say they are afraid to cast their support in any direction.

Yet establishing a suitable local government that wins over this hesitant population is one of the biggest and most important challenges the US faces. It could determine the success of the offensive, one of the largest in the nine-year Afghanistan war and a high-profile test of the US's "clear, hold, and build" strategy.

Taliban's haunting presence

The Taliban, who imposed de facto rule in Marjah in 2008, appear to have scattered since the offensive, but their influence still looms. The leaders of the insurgency mostly fled, locals say, and their shadow government – complete with Islamic courts and a "police" force – has disbanded.

But the residue of nearly two years of Taliban rule remains. Most midlevel leaders and the rank and file have simply melted back into the population. "They still have spies and supporters everywhere. If they catch us talking to the troops they can behead us," says Musa Aqa Jan, a laborer, echoing a widely shared view.

Western forces, meanwhile, only have direct control of the three bazaars that make up Marjah's commercial centers, US and Afghan officials say. Outside of these bazaars, government officials still cannot move without heavy armored protection because of the threat of mines and ambushes.

"There are thousands of mines everywhere," says Daoud Ahmadi, the spokesman for Helmand Province, where Marjah lies. "We didn't expect this. This is slowing things down for us and the Americans."

Insurgents have even littered farmers' fields with mines, dissuading some who fled the fighting from returning to their homes. Some of these farmers are huddled in refugee camps just outside Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah. "We are living in open-air tents, we don't have any roof over our heads," says Yaka Khan, a refugee.

Shura makeup worries locals

Many of those who have fled have returned, however, and say they are ready to brave the possibility of Taliban threats. But for them an even greater potential danger lurks: the new government slated to take the Taliban's place.

The man tapped to be Marjah's governor is Abdul Zahir, a Helmand native who has spent

the past 15 years in Germany and is unknown to most of the local population. He only travels with heavy protection and has yet to visit most parts of Marjah. It may take months before his efforts can be appraised, Helmand authorities say.

In the meantime, he is helping assemble one of Marjah's key governing institutions: the local shura, or council. This group will draw from local notables and will aid Mr. Zahir in running day-to-day affairs. The Afghan government will ultimately pick the body's members, but with input from the local population and Western officials.

It's the makeup of this council that stokes the most concern among locals. At the heart of the fears is whether it will include a notorious veteran mujahideen commander who has played a central role in Helmand's politics for more than 20 years. Abdur Rahman Jan was the province's police chief until 2006, and he heads a 34-man council of landlords, elders, and commanders that ruled Marjah until the 2008 Taliban takeover.

While in power the council became so infamous for abuse that some say it turned locals away from the government. "The main reason the Taliban grew in Marjah is because of these people," says Qasim Noorzai, a government official in Helmand who works with tribal elders from the area. A number of other government officials, Marjah elders, and locals agree with this assessment.

Marjah elders who met President Hamid Karzai earlier in the month insisted that their backing of the new government depends on whether the old officials are excluded, authorities say. "But they [the old officials] have really good connections and backing in Kabul, so they are not out of the picture yet," says Mr. Noorzai.

As Afghan officials work to develop a new council, the old council is angling for influence in the post-Taliban administration. "We want to convince the Afghan government and the Americans that only we can stabilize Marjah," says Muhammad Salim, a council member, interviewed in Kabul. He and more than a dozen others have traveled to the capital several times in recent months to lobby lawmakers and associates of President Karzai.

Worse than the Taliban?

The moves are sparking concerns because a number of government officials, human rights organizations, and locals accuse Mr. Jan and his associates of human rights violations.

Dad Muhammad, a Marjah elder, tells a variation of an oft-repeated complaint that men associated with Mr. Jan's private militia attacked his house, forcibly evicted his family, and took his land.

The old council led by Jan has "grabbed more than 20,000 jeribs of land from poor people," says Mr. Ahmadi, the provincial spokesman. One jerib, an Afghan unit of measurement, equals roughly half an acre.

Others speak of being hauled into secret prisons or being robbed. “My brother and I owned a cell phone shop, and Tor Jan’s men [a commander of Abdur Rahman Jan] ransacked it,” says Faizullah Zaher, a Marjah shopkeeper. “They took everything and there was nothing we could say.”

The Afghan government removed Mr. Jan from his post in 2006 after accusations from Western officials that he was involved in drug trafficking, but he continued to wield influence in Marjah through the council. Jan was not available for comment. Members of his council defend him, however, and say that those who were arrested or had land taken from them were associated with the Taliban.

Locals are paying attention as he seeks to maneuver back into power.

“We’ll be watching all of these” developments, says Yaka Khan, the refugee. “If the same mistakes happen this time, we will lose our people to the Taliban again.”

## **Hizb-i-Islami delegation to meet with UN**

**The Associated Press**  
**03/24/2010**

KABUL - Representatives of a militant group linked to an infamous Afghan warlord are hoping to convince U.N. officials Thursday that it's the right time for a peace deal with insurgents.

Mohammad Daoud Abedi, a spokesman for the Hizb-i-Islami faction, said Wednesday night that the United Nations asked the delegation for a meeting, which follows talks that the Taliban-linked group had with President Hamid Karzai earlier this week.

He said the group also plans to speak with representatives from the European Union, but an official at the EU office said he had no knowledge of any meeting with the delegation.

Talk about possible reconciliation with insurgent groups, however, has not reduced violence, especially in southern Afghanistan where a major military operation is under way to rout the Taliban from parts of Helmand province. NATO said two service members were killed Wednesday in a bombing, and another died as a result of small-arms attack, in the south.

It is the first time that high-ranking representatives of the insurgent group, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, have traveled to Kabul to discuss peace. It's uncertain whether the talks with Hekmatyar's group will lead to an end game in the eight-year war, given the group's demand for a quick exit of foreign forces.

Hizb-i-Islami wants international forces to begin withdrawing in July - a year ahead of

President Barack Obama's desired deadline to begin a pullout, if conditions allow. But Abedi said the group is flexible on that main point of its 15-point peace offer.

"That is a starting point," Abedi said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press. "If we start the process, we can be ready by another year or so.

"If President Obama wants the situation to be right for the withdrawal of the foreign forces from Afghanistan, he should start talking and taking some firm, honest steps to make the situation acceptable for that day. That's why we are putting this proposal on the table, to say `If you really mean this, then let's work and get this thing done.'"

U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden has said U.S. officials have no plans to meet with representatives of Hekmatyar's group. Abedi said the delegation hoped European officials would persuade the U.S. government to get involved in the negotiations.

"The ball is in their court." Abedi said. "If the U.S. government would like to leave in honor and leave something behind that the Afghan people and the international community would be proud and grateful for, it is good for them to expedite the peace process, get involved in the negotiations and bring out their concerns so we could answer them and together we could get this all done and bring this ugly war to an end."

Hekmatyar's power has waned over the years and he commands far fewer fighters than the Taliban. Nevertheless, Hizb-i-Islami is very active in at least four provinces of eastern Afghanistan and parts of the north. His defection from the insurgency would be a coup for Karzai and could encourage some Taliban commanders to explore their own peace deals.

Hekmatyar, who is in his 60s, was a major recipient of U.S. military aid during the war against the Soviets in the 1980s but fell out of favor with Washington because of his role in the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal. The U.S. government declared Hekmatyar a "global terrorist" in February 2003, saying he participated in and supported terror acts committed by al-Qaida and the Taliban.

The Taliban has publicly denounced Hizb-i-Islami's peace offer, but Abedi said the two groups have a common goal.

"Taliban and Hizb-i-Islami both think that the presence of the foreign forces in Afghanistan is the cause of the war. So if we take away the cause, then what reason would Taliban or anybody else have to continue the war?" Abedi asked.

This month, a Karzai adviser and other Afghans involved in the peace process said the government had been holding secret talks the Taliban's No. 2, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, when he was recently captured in Pakistan.

Maj. Gen. Gordon Messenger, a senior defense adviser for Britain and a former commander in Afghanistan, said he thinks reconciliation will work when the Taliban



becomes more desperate.

"I think everyone recognizes that political reconciliation has a part to play in this ... but I also think we can't just sit there and do nothing," Messenger said.

"It's important that when you have reconciliation, you have both the carrot and the stick," Messenger said. "Unless they feel in a weak position, unless they feel this stick hovering over their heads, they are far less likely to reconcile or negotiate."

## **Two NATO soldiers, five Afghans killed in unrest**

**AFP**

**03/24/2010**

KABUL — Two NATO soldiers and two Afghan mine clearers have been killed in bombings in southern Afghanistan, while three policemen died in a clash with Taliban fighters, officials and NATO said Wednesday.

The two NATO casualties, from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), bring to 133 the number of foreign soldiers killed in the country this year, according to an AFP tally based on the independent icasualties website.

"Two ISAF service members were killed in an improvised explosive device attack in southern Afghanistan today," the alliance said in a statement.

The force did not disclose the dead soldiers' nationality.

The homemade bombs, known as IEDs, are the weapon of choice for Taliban militants and are the main cause of casualties to foreign and local troops.

Two Afghan mine clearers were killed and two others injured Tuesday when their vehicle struck a roadside IED in southern Afghanistan's Uruzgan province as they travelled to work, a local police chief said.

"Two mine clearers were killed and two were wounded in the roadside bomb," Mohammad Gula, deputy provincial police chief, told AFP on Wednesday.

The men were employees of the Mine Detection Center, a non-governmental organisation established in 1989 to sweep landmines planted mostly during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

A Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, claimed responsibility for the blast and said they were targeting a military vehicle.

Taliban insurgents also attacked a police post in the southern province of Ghazni late Tuesday, sparking a firefight that left three policemen and two militants dead, said provincial police chief Khial Baz Shirzai.

Then on Wednesday, a civilian helicopter contracted by the US military was forced to land after coming under fire in northern Kunduz province.

District chief Shaikh Saadi blamed technical problems, but an ISAF statement later said it was a "precautionary landing" and there were no casualties.

There are currently about 120,000 troops under NATO and US command in Afghanistan battling a worsening Taliban-led insurgency now in its ninth year, with troop numbers expected to swell to 150,000 within months.

## **China, Afghanistan plan closer partnership as Karzai concludes state visit**

**Xinhua**  
**03/25/2010**

Afghan President Hamid Karzai on Thursday concluded a three-day state visit to China during which deals on aid, tax reduction and training were inked to cement bilateral comprehensive cooperation.

Chinese President Hu Jintao and Karzai witnessed the signing of three documents on economic and technological cooperation, favorable tariffs for Afghan exports to China and training programs on Wednesday.

In his meeting with top Chinese legislator Wu Bangguo on Thursday afternoon, Karzai said his country hopes to further expand cooperation with China in the areas of politics, trade, defense and education, and enhance coordination on regional and global issues.

Wu told Karzai China always respects Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and supports the country's efforts for national stability and development.

Hailing the progress of bilateral ties since the establishment of diplomatic ties 55 years ago, Wu said China hopes to push forward all-round cooperative partnership with the country and hopes the two countries to stay as good neighbors, good friends and good partners forever.

Wu appreciated Afghanistan's support for China on Taiwan issue and issues regarding Tibet and Xinjiang.

Karzai said currently Afghanistan-China relations are at the best period of time in the history, adding his country is committed to strengthening good-neighborly ties with China.

Premier Wen Jiabao also met with Karzai on Thursday.

It was Karzai's fourth visit to China as Afghan president. A high ranking delegation including leading ministers and 20 businessmen, are accompanying him in his China trip.

## **Social Headlines**

### **Afghan official: At least 35 die in avalanche**

**The Associated Press**  
**03/23/2010**

KABUL – The bodies of 30 people were recovered Tuesday from the site of avalanche in a remote area of northeastern Afghanistan, a police official said.

The remains of five other people lost in the snow slide that occurred two weeks ago have not yet been located, said police chief Aja Noor Kemtuz in Badakhshan province. Police and rescue workers spent four days getting to the scene, he said.

Five houses were destroyed in the avalanche, which occurred in the Arghang Khzakhka district north of Faizabad — about 30 miles (50 kilometers) south of the Tajikistan border. An estimated 500 cattle and other animals also were killed, he said.

Local residents reported the avalanche in the village of Dood Daood. The road to the village is blocked by snow for several months of the year.

"They are very poor people living in a very remote area," the police chief said. "From this village to another village is a three days walk."

In February, at least 171 people died in an avalanche at the 12,700-foot (3,800-meter) - high Salang Pass, the major route through the Hindu Kush mountains that connects the Afghan capital of Kabul to the north of the country.

### **Karzai Visits China With Ministers, Natural Gas Development Plans**

**RFE/RL**  
**03/23/2010**

KABUL - Afghan President Hamid Karzai is traveling to Beijing today with a government delegation that includes the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, mines, and investment.

RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan reports that Afghanistan's minister of mines is thought to be taking information about the development of 11 natural gas sites in the northwestern Afghan provinces of Jowzjan and Maimana. An international tender is now under way to determine who will win rights to develop those natural gas fields.

China already is developing natural gas fields nearby in eastern Turkmenistan. In December, a major pipeline was opened near the Afghan border that links western China to Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The Afghan president's office says Karzai is expected to sign agreements with Beijing on increasing trade with China. That includes an accord that would eliminate custom tariffs between the two countries. Agreements also are expected that would boost Chinese help in the fields of communication, the economy, education, and health care.

## **Afghans celebrate new year with hopes for peace**

**AFP**

**03/21/2010**

**By Sardar Ahmad**

MAZAR-I-SHARIF - Afghans have travelled from across their war-ravaged country to the northern city of Mazar-I-Sharif united behind one wish: that the advent of the new year will bring them peace.

Up to half a million people are in the city, police said, to mark the spring equinox and the first day of the traditional Persian new year, called Nowruz and celebrated across Central Asia and Iran.

Mazar is at the heart of one of the most peaceful regions of the country, but security is tight amid an escalation of Taliban activity in the north.

City police chief Abdul Rauf Taj said 4,000 security personnel had been deployed against insurgent attacks and all visitors were being screened at seven check points around the city outskirts.

"Every person and every vehicle entering the city is being searched, we're in full control of security," he said, adding that 10,000 cars, each carrying between five and ten people, had entered the city in recent days.

Insurgent activity has escalated in northern Afghanistan over the past year as US-led military efforts to eradicate the Taliban from their southern strongholds have intensified, driving the war north.

The Taliban have established shadow administrations across a swathe of northern provinces, including Kunduz, Balkh and Faryab, and military bases run by NATO allies such as Germany and Norway are being reinforced by US troops in an effort to reverse the trend, military and security officials have said.

The US and NATO have more than 120,000 troops in Afghanistan fighting the

insurgents, with another 30,000 arriving in coming months, mostly for deployment in southern Helmand and Kandahar provinces, Taliban hotbeds.

After recent deadly and coordinated attacks in Kabul and Kandahar cities, tensions across the country have been running high ahead of Nowruz amid expectations of Taliban attacks on major population centres.

For many people converging on Mazar-I-Sharif's breathtaking Blue Mosque, believed to be the grave of Islam's fourth caliph Hazrat Ali, peace was at the heart of their new year wishes.

The Taliban outlawed this celebration during their brutal rule of Afghanistan -- when Mazar-I-Sharif was never fully under their control-- from 1996 until the US-led invasion in late 2001.

Since the Taliban's downfall, Mazar-I-Sharif has reclaimed its place as the centre of Afghanistan's Nowruz festivities, a blend of ancient Zoroastrian rites and Afghan traditions dating back thousands of years.

"One of my biggest wishes has been to participate in Nowruz celebrations here and I have finally made it," said Murtaza Rezayee, a student from the central province of Daikundi.

Getting here wasn't easy, he said, as the road traverses the often treacherous Salang Pass, scene in February of one of Afghanistan's worst natural disasters when avalanches buried cars and buses, killing 170 people.

But he said he had been saving up for five years, and his family sold a goat to help cover his travel expenses so he could bring in the year 1389 at Ali's shrine.

"I will make a wish," he said, adding: "My biggest wish is for peace for Afghanistan. Just peace."

Shopkeeper Besmiullah Abdul Saleem was more pragmatic, hoping the economy improves and business picks up -- as it has after previous Nowruz visits to the Blue Mosque.

"I come every year and thanks to Hazrat Ali my business has been very, very good. I owe everything to this," he said, as a sweep of his arm took in the turquoise tiles of the mosque and the white doves flying over it.

But peace was also on his mind, he said, adding: "I think every Afghan will wish for peace before anything else."

For some Afghans, the shrine brings more than just luck and fortune; some believe it also has the power to cure the ill and infirm.

Shepherd Abdul Saleem said he had brought his "insane" daughter in the hope of a miraculous cure from the spirit of Ali.

"I took her to the clinic in our village but nothing happened, she's as she was before," he said, pointing to his eight-year-old daughter as she sat cross-legged beside him, her wrists bound with a scarf.

"I have heard from lots of people that when doctors can't do any thing, Ali can.

"So I have brought her here to Ali's court -- this is my last hope," he said.

## **Afghan drug cartels squeeze poppy farmers**

**AFP**

**03/21/2010**

**By Lynne O'Donnell**

LASHKAR GAH - Like farmers the world over Haji Afzal has locked in the price for his crop with a forward contract.

Rather than a contract on the Chicago Board of Trade -- like an American wheat farmer or a Thai rice grower -- Afzal was paid 400,000 Pakistani rupees (5,000 dollars) by a middleman for the world's biggest drugs cartels.

Afzal will harvest in a month, when the tall green weeds on his land have burst into scarlet bloom and the poppy bulbs ooze sap that will become opium.

The cash ensured Afzal had all he needed for a good crop -- seed, water, fertiliser, tools -- supplied by the men who will process his opium into heroin and ship it across the world.

But opium prices have fallen over the past year by about 30 percent, to less than 50 dollars a kilogramme, and Afzal worries officials will destroy his plants -- or demand bribes not to.

He also worries his farm will be squeezed between the Afghan government with its Western military backers and Taliban militants who control poppy production in Helmand province, source of most of the world's opium.

Azfal -- not his real name -- lives in Gereshk and is watching closely as US Marines lead efforts to assert government rule in Marjah, a farming district further south down the Helmand River.

The area has for years been controlled by insurgents and drug traffickers who compel

farmers to grow poppies, paying for the raw opium they produce or making life difficult if they do not.

"We know the government has started a campaign to eradicate opium," said Azfal, referring to new plans to wipe out poppies.

"Some people are worried, although we know they cannot extend their campaign to our district because there are Taliban who will resist and attack them.

"But we are also worried about the military -- if the Marjah operation goes well, they may plan to extend their operation to other parts of Helmand," he said.

-- Poppy farmers squeezed between drug cartels, corrupt officials --

Marjah is the target of a coordinated campaign to push out militants and drug dealers and establish government control with police and civil services.

Operation Mushtarak ("together" in Dari and Pashto) is the test of a US-led counter-insurgency strategy focused on winning the confidence of local people with a level of security to keep the Taliban and drug lords from returning.

It has not worked in the past because the Afghan government could not ensure a stable and accountable presence with officials immune to the temptations of corruption inherent in the three-billion-dollar-a-year drugs business.

"Drug money is addictive, and is starting to trump ideology," said the head of the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa, in a September report.

Cooperation between the Taliban, drug smugglers and corrupt officials has turned areas such as Marjah into mafia fiefdoms.

Militants provide the muscle to coerce farmers to grow poppy and protect the processing labs and smuggling routes through Pakistan to the east, Iran to the west or the former Soviet states to the north.

The Taliban use religion and violence to bolster their power -- telling local people it is un-Islamic, for instance, to send their girls to school, and administering rough justice to ensure compliance.

This "marriage of convenience" has turned Afghanistan into a narco-state comparable to Colombia, Costa said.

Afghan opium funds crime gangs, insurgencies and terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere, his report said, adding "collusion with corrupt government officials is undermining public trust, security and the rule of law".



-- Eradication efforts a failure --

In Lashkar Gah, a reconstruction team -- where British bureaucrats lead a multinational team of experts in such areas as governance, justice and counter-narcotics -- has distributed wheat seed to 40,000 Helmand farmers in an effort to provide alternatives to poppy, said deputy head Bridget Brind.

"These sort of counter-narcotics initiatives reduce insurgent influence and increase government authority," she told reporters, adding that the fall in opium prices was matched by a wheat price rise, another reason to switch.

But the figures don't quite match the rhetoric and UNODC has called eradication "a failure."

In 2008-2009, only 10,000 hectares of opium, or less than four percent of land planted, were eradicated.

Norine MacDonald, president of the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS), said: "If these calculations are accurate, it still leaves a staggering 1.4 million people involved in illegal poppy cultivation.

"Despite good intentions and investment in alternative development programmes there is still no structural solution for these millions of Afghans," she told a US Senate hearing in October.

UNODC found opium output down by 10 percent, to 6,900 tonnes in 2009, but said yield rose 15 percent because farmers extracted more opium per bulb.

Production far outstripped annual world demand of 5,000 tonnes, it said.

For farmers the world over the equation of over-supply and falling prices is simple and in Afghanistan cartels are hoarding, with stockpiles of opium estimated at 10,000 tonnes.

That's two years supply of heroin for addicts, or three years of morphine for medical use, according to UNODC.

-- Amid military campaign, smugglers look for other routes --

Nevertheless, the Afghan government this month announced eradication had begun anew in Helmand, Nangahar and Farah provinces, and will soon begin in Kandahar.

Deputy Interior Minister Mohammad Daud Daud said poppy cultivation had stopped in 21 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces by 2009, but there was "minor" planting in 18 of those provinces this year, suggesting a re-emergence.

He said he hoped the programme would see 25 provinces cleared of poppy by the end of

this year.

Interdiction had also failed, with only about two percent of the world's opium seized in Afghanistan, UN figures show.

Sending in the military is having an impact, another expert said on condition of anonymity, comparing it to the short-lived but effective tactics of the Taliban's 1996-2001 regime.

It will only work if the government can provide security along with alternatives, she said, "because there is so much money to be made".

A Helmand smuggler said the Marjah campaign has shaken up kingpins, who are now looking for alternative routes.

"Our main route for transporting drugs to neighbouring districts, provinces and countries was Marjah," he said, giving his name as Haji Abdul Qudos.

As he had already advanced 10 million rupees to farmers, he would be looking for other ways to get the drugs out, not ways to get out of drugs.

"We will find alternative routes or even use Marjah roads, but (the military campaign and presence of police) mean it is more difficult now, with the danger that our opium is sometimes confiscated by international forces," he said.

"At the moment no one's farms have been eradicated but there is the concern that they might be."

## **Blasphemous journalist freed**

**Pajhwok**

**03/25/2010**

**By Frozan Rehmani**

KABUL - An Afghan journalist, sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment for allegedly committing blasphemy, has been released after spending two and half years in jail.

Ghaus Zalmay, who helped publish a Dari version of the Holy Quran without its Arabic script, said he was freed in the wake of a forgiveness order issued by President Hamid Karzai.

The Quran was rendered into Dari by a translator and reviewed by a religious leader in Kabul before Zalmay printed and distributed it in the deeply conservative Muslim country.

Zalmay insisted the move was intended to serve his religion, but a number of Islamic institutions as well as the Ministry of Hajj criticised him for mistranslations of some verses and printing it without the Arabic script.

All the organisations that slammed him have now complied with President Karzai's decree and describe Zalmay's imprisonment as "enough."

Upper House Speaker Sibghatullah Mujaddedi and Ulema Council leaders suggested his release to the president, according to Zalmay, a former spokesman for the Attorney General.

## **Economical Headlines**

### **China, Afghanistan forge closer economic ties as new agreements are signed**

**Xinhua**  
**03/24/2010**

China and Afghanistan took new steps Wednesday to further strengthen economic and trade links as new agreements were inked regarding aid, tax reduction and training.

Chinese President Hu Jintao and visiting Afghan President Hamid Karzai witnessed the signing of three documents on economic and technological cooperation, favorable tariffs for Afghan exports to China and training programs.

During his meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao, Karzai said Afghanistan was honored to have China as a friend and neighbor.

China's economic assistance to Afghanistan can be dated back to the the mid 1950s when the two countries established diplomatic links. Chinese engineers built a number of hospitals and water conservancy projects around the Central Asia country. The most well-known project is a large dam some 40 kilometers away from Kabul.

Since 2002, China has given more than 900 million yuan (130 million U.S. dollars) in aid for the rehabilitation of Afghanistan. And last year, China announced it would provide an additional 75 million U.S. dollars of aid to Afghanistan over the next five years.

In the meeting with President Hu, Karzai expressed gratefulness to China for the support and encouragement that it had given Afghanistan since the establishment of diplomatic ties, in particular the past eight years during his presidency.

Two way trade between the two countries has been growing rapidly in recent years, reaching 155 million U.S. dollars in 2008.

Starting from July, 2006, China has applied zero tariffs on 278 items of export products from Afghanistan.

China Metallurgical Group Corp. has invested in Aynak copper mine in Afghanistan. Implementation of this project helped create job opportunities for thousands of local people.

China and Afghanistan share a common border. Besides economic links, the two

countries have expanded cooperation in other areas in recent years, including the fight against the three evil forces of terrorism, extremism and separatism.

## **Afghanistan boosts budget revenue by 45 percent**

**Reuters**

**03/25/2010**

**By Sayed Salahduddin**

- \* Data show Afghanistan still dependent on Western aid
- \* Washington seeks to make country more self-sufficient
- \* Minister hopes to cover budget expenditure within 3 years

KABUL - Afghanistan's state revenues rose by 45 percent last year, but still only account for less than a third of the budget in a country that remains dependent on Western aid, the finance ministry said on Thursday.

A series of reforms and anti-corruption measures brought Afghanistan's domestic revenues to \$600 million in the fiscal year that ended this week, from \$400 million in 2008-09, Finance Ministry spokesman Aziz Shams said.

Building the Afghan government's administrative capacity is the centrepiece of U.S. President Barack Obama's strategy to begin withdrawing troops next year. Revenue remains barely \$20 per person per year, hardly enough to provide services like schools, hospitals, courts, roads, an army and police.

State revenue accounts for about 5 percent of gross domestic product. The United Nations estimates Afghans spend more than four times as much on bribes.

Shams said Afghanistan hopes to wean itself from international aid for ordinary budget expenses in three years.

Afghanistan's ordinary budget for last year was more than \$1.9 billion, 70 percent of which was provided by donor nations, Shams said. The international community also contributed \$2.4 billion for a separate development budget to improve the economy and build infrastructure.

This year's ordinary budget, sent to parliament for approval, is nearly \$2.4 billion, with security forces being the focus of expenditure, Shams told Reuters by telephone.

The West, which has had tens of thousands of troops in Afghanistan since ousting the Taliban in 2001, has had to bankroll the budget for day-to-day government expenses, as well as pouring in billions for security and reconstruction.

Steps taken last year to improve revenue collection include making tax payments easier, reducing fines to encourage compliance, and expanding the collection of tax on income of state employees and on property rents, Shams said.

"The establishment of an anti-corruption department in the ministry has played a major role too. There have been 150 cases (of corruption) and there have been some arrests," he said.

"There have been reforms in the customs and unfit individuals are gone. The main government's anti-drive body has had some good proposals which have led to the collection of revenues."

Plans to improve revenue will include imposing taxes on minerals, such as mines for precious stones and coal, as well as tightening ways of taxing flights using Afghan air space or airports.

"This year we hope to be able to pay for 65 percent of our ordinary budget, and we have predictions that in three years with the measures which I mentioned we will be able to pay all of it ourselves," Shams said.

Exploitation of Afghanistan's mineral sector could enable the country to become self-sufficient economically in future years.

A \$4.4 billion project agreed with China to extract copper ore south of Kabul is by far the biggest commercial investment ever in Afghanistan.

Work on the project has already begun, and in three or four years Jiangx Copper Co and Metallurgical Corp of Chian are expected to start production. (Editing by Peter Graff and Ron Popeski)