

Business and Politics in the Muslim World

Afghanistan This Week

Report Number: 118

Week 1-7 May 2010

May, 8, 2010

Mohammad Amin

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Contents

Political Headlines Summary	3
Geo-Strategic Headlines Summary	4
Social Headlines Summary	4
Economical Headlines Summary	5
Political Headlines	6
Two girls dead in NATO mortar-shell fire	6
Abducted Afghan diplomat appears in video.....	6
Iran under fire in Wolesi Jirga	7
Incomplete cabinet could lead to trust-deficit: MPs	9
US forces training Afghan villagers to watch for Taliban.....	10
Iran asked to stop executing Afghans	11
Iran summons Afghan charge d'affaires	12
British and US accused of poppy plague warfare in Afghanistan	13
16 arrested for plotting attacks.....	15
Thousands of acres of land illegal grabbed in north.....	16
Geo-Strategic Headlines	18
Karzai to seek Obama's approval for peace deals with insurgents	18
Karzai arrives Monday for four-day Washington visit.....	20
Social Headlines	22
Planning to build four mega water dams underway.....	22
Second VP, ministers accused of embezzling a million dollars	22
Flood claims 14 lives in W. Afghanistan.....	24
Ex-female govt servant found beheaded in Zabul	24
Locals flee Marja as insecurity rises.....	25
Economical Headlines	27
Afghanistan supersedes Pak in tea import	27

Political Headlines Summary

Two girls dead in NATO mortar-shell fire

ASADABAD - Two girls were killed and six others including children and women were wounded when a mortar shell allegedly fired by NATO forces struck their house in the eastern province of Kunar on Sunday, an official said.

Abducted Afghan diplomat appears in video

ISLAMABAD – An Afghan diplomat kidnapped in Pakistan nearly two years ago has appeared in a video pleading with Kabul to save his life and accept conditions for his release.

Iran under fire in Wolesi Jirga

KABUL - Some members of the Wolesi Jirga, or lower house of parliament, Saturday claimed body parts of the Afghan citizens, executed in neighbouring Iran, were removed.

Incomplete cabinet could lead to trust-deficit: MPs

KABUL - Some members of the Wolesi Jirga or lower house of parliament have criticised the government for not introducing the remaining ministers and members of the Commission on the Supervision of the Implementation of the constitution to the Jirga.

US forces training Afghan villagers to watch for Taliban

ARGHANDAB DISTRICT - Taliban fighters used to swagger with impunity through this farming village, threatening to assassinate government collaborators. They seeded the main thoroughfare, a dirt road with moonlike craters, with land mines. They paid local men to attack US and Afghan troops.

Iran asked to stop executing Afghans

KABUL - Thousands of people on Sunday rallied in this central capital against the Iranian government demanding an immediate halt to the process of executing Afghan death-row prisoners in the neighboring country, where several immigrants were reportedly burnt to death recently.

Iran summons Afghan charge d'affaires

Iran's Foreign Ministry has summoned Afghanistan's charge d'affaires to Tehran over the irresponsible remarks made by some Afghan officials about Iran.

British and US accused of poppy plague warfare in Afghanistan

Britain and the US have been accused of launching secret biological warfare on Afghanistan's poppy fields in a bid to blight the opium crop.

16 arrested for plotting attacks

KABUL — Afghan police in recent weeks have arrested 16 people who were plotting suicide and rocket attacks in the capital and are hunting for other suspects, top security officials said Thursday.

Thousands of acres of land illegal grabbed in north

MAZAR-I-SHARIF (PAN): Powerful men had forcefully captured thousands of acres of land in northern provinces, locals and officials said.

Geo-Strategic Headlines Summary

Karzai to seek Obama's approval for peace deals with insurgents

KABUL -- The most meaningful part of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to Washington next week may end up being talks about talks.

Karzai arrives Monday for four-day Washington visit

WASHINGTON — The United States will next week seek to ease public spats with President Hamid Karzai, but also imply that its alliance with Afghanistan is not solely defined by its volatile relationship with him.

Social Headlines Summary

Planning to build four mega water dams underway

KABUL - Work on the construction of four mega water dams to meet irrigation and water needs would be launched in three months in four provinces in the country, an official said on Sunday.

Second VP, ministers accused of embezzling a million dollars

KABUL - Hajj and Auqaf ministry's cashier has accused second vice president and seven ministers of embezzling one million of dollars during last year's Haj ritual.

Flood claims 14 lives in W. Afghanistan

Heavy rain and flooding in the militancy-hit Afghanistan's western Herat province claimed the lives of 14 people including seven children and three women on Wednesday, Provincial Governor Ahmad Yousuf Nuristani said.

Ex-female govt servant found beheaded in Zabul

QALAT - A headless body of a former female government employee was found dumped on a roadside in southern Zabul province early Monday, an official and witnesses said.

Locals flee Marja as insecurity rises

LASHKARGAH - A large number of locals have fled Marja district due to an increasing insurgency in the former Taliban stronghold, which was captured in a major offensive in February.

Economical Headlines Summary

Afghanistan supersedes Pak in tea import

KARACHI - Afghanistan has taken over third position in tea import from Kenya during the quarter ending March, pushing down Pakistan to fourth slot.

Political Headlines

Two girls dead in NATO mortar-shell fire

Pajhwok

05/03/2010

By Khan Wali Salarzai

ASADABAD - Two girls were killed and six others including children and women were wounded when a mortar shell allegedly fired by NATO forces struck their house in the eastern province of Kunar on Sunday, an official said.

The incident happened in the Karmul area of Wata Pur district when the foreign troops responded to a militant attack, provincial police chief, Brig. Gen. Khalilullah Ziayee, told Pajhwok Afghan News.

The militants attacked a patrol of the troops, he said, adding no one was hurt in the attack.

Four wounded people were brought to the civil hospital in Asadabad, provincial capital, where a girl died of her wounds, public health director, Dr. Asadullah Fazli, said. The condition of other three injured was stable, he added.

NATO media office in eastern zone confirmed the incident. However, it said they had no information about civilian casualties.

Abducted Afghan diplomat appears in video

AFP

05/03/2010

ISLAMABAD – An Afghan diplomat kidnapped in Pakistan nearly two years ago has appeared in a video pleading with Kabul to save his life and accept conditions for his release.

Abdul Khaliq Farahi, 53, was snatched at gunpoint in September 2008 in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar. His driver was killed.

Farahi had been appointed Afghan consul general in Peshawar in 2002. In August 2008, he was promoted to ambassador to Pakistan but was kidnapped before taking up his new duties.

The video was broadcast by Pakistan's private TV channel Geo late Sunday and showed Farahi appealing for his life while flanked by two armed men in masks.

Kateeba Salahuddin Ayubi, a hitherto unheard of militant group, claimed responsibility for the kidnapping.

The diplomat, whose voice was identified by an AFP reporter and a security official, said he had been accused of working with representatives of the United States and the Afghan government, which was punishable by death.

One masked man said demands for Farahi's release had been conveyed to the Afghan government but accused the authorities of not being serious.

A Pakistani security official confirmed that Farahi spoke in the seven-minute video, but said it was unclear whether the tape had been filmed in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

While the group did not detail their demands in the video, the security official said they were demanding the release of Al-Qaeda militants held in the US-run military prison Bagram, just north of the Afghan capital Kabul.

Iran under fire in Wolesi Jirga

Pajhwok

05/03/2010

By Abasin Zaheer

KABUL - Some members of the Wolesi Jirga, or lower house of parliament, Saturday claimed body parts of the Afghan citizens, executed in neighbouring Iran, were removed.

Much of today's debate revolved around the emotive issue of the Afghan nationals put to death in Iran on different charges. But the heated discussion degenerated into a rumpus when a lawmaker came out in defence of Iran.

A public representative from central Daikundi province insisted Iran gouged out body parts of condemned prisoners with their consent. Siddiqui Neeli's remarks triggered howls of protest from other MPs.

With her colleagues denouncing Neeli's stout defence of Tehran, parliamentarian from Kabul Shukria Barakzai called for dispatching an official letter to the Iranian government to put an immediate end to such callous treatment of death-row prisoners.

Another MP, Ramazan Bashardost, stressed a protest movement against the Iranian government. "If we pour onto on the streets, a million of Kabul residents would join us", he said.

Bashardost suggested the protestors should encircle the Iranian embassy till Tehran stopped its cruel treatment of Afghans.

The neighbouring country executed Afghans on a daily basis without any consultation with the Afghan government, said Alami Balkhi. He said there was no agreement between the two countries on exchanging death-row prisoners.

After a prolonged debate, Speaker Yunus Qanuni said the Afghan foreign minister and the Iranian ambassador should be summoned to the house during the next session.

The issue of executions was raised a month back by a lawmaker from western Herat province, bordering Iran. Gul Ahmad Amini said 45 bodies of Afghans executed in Iran had been transferred to the province.

But Karzai's national security advisor, Dr. Rangin Dabar Spanta, said only six Afghans were put to death by the Iranian government.

In mid-April, a report sent by an Afghan diplomat to the foreign ministry in Kabul said at least three Afghan nationals were burnt to death in the Iranian province of Qazvin.

Mohammad Kabir Farahi, deputy minister of foreign affairs, dispatched the official letter to the ministry. The report said the deputy minister discussed the killing and injuring of eight Afghan citizens by Iranian security forces in Sistan and Balochistan provinces.

Farahi said in the document: "The killing and injuring of eight Afghans in Sistan and Balochistan provinces and burning of three others in Qazvin province were the issues discussed with the Iranian foreign ministry".

In today's session, the issue of civilian killings by foreign troops was also raised. Legislator Abdul Majeed asked the Wolesi Jirga to approve a legal framework for the stay of international soldiers in Afghanistan.

He assailed foreign soldiers for the deteriorating security situation in some parts of the country, saying they wanted instability in Afghanistan to justify their deployment. According to him, half of the people killed by NATO-led soldiers were civilians.

Wolesi Jirga member from Paktika, Khalid Farooqi, supported Abdul Majeed's suggestion for a law setting a timeframe for the pullout of foreign troops. Passing such a law would be a big achievement for the lower house, he believed.

Finally, parliamentarians decided to summon security officials next Monday before taking a decision in this regard. Three days back, US troops raided the house of Safia Siddique in Nangarhar and killed her relative, sparking a public protest.

Incomplete cabinet could lead to trust-deficit: MPs

Pajhwok

05/03/2010

By Abasin Zaheer

KABUL - Some members of the Wolesi Jirga or lower house of parliament have criticised the government for not introducing the remaining ministers and members of the Commission on the Supervision of the Implementation of the constitution to the Jirga.

Presidential spokesman Waheed Omar had told journalists that the cabinet members and members of the commission would be introduced to the jirga next week. However, they were not introduced and the Wolesi Jirga members say such steps would create trust deficit between the people and the government.

Najeeba Sharif, member of the Jirga from Kabul, said government would lose trust of the people. She said the president and his government officials had become habitual of breaking the law. She said the government was looking for its own interest in violating the law.

Fatima Azizi, member of the jirga from Kunduz, expressed similar views. She said they were demanding of the government to introduce the remaining picks, but their demands fell on deaf ears. She said the government was not paying heed to the decisions made by the parliament.

The government is trying to delay the nomination of the remaining cabinet ministers until the new parliament is formed, she alleged, suggesting the early introduction was in benefit of the government and the people at large.

Sayed Hasim Faulad, member of the Wolesi Jirga from Nangarhar, however, said the delay was a result of little understanding between the executive and the legislature. He said the jirga had rejected Rangin Dadfar Spanta as minister two years ago, but he was still serving as minister in the cabinet.

However, deputy spokesman for the president, Siamak Hirawi told Pajhwok that the members were not introduced to the parliament due to their busy schedule.

Rejecting the impression that the government was not respecting the Wolesi Jirga's decisions, he added there was enough time to introduce the members.

Political analyst Abdul Ghafoor Liwal said there was a competition between the executive and the legislature. He said the problem would not emerge if there was a clear explanation of the constitution and a body that could supervise the implementation of the basic law.

He said both the pillars of the state should be strong enough to ensure political stability in

the country. Fourteen of the 25 members of the cabinet had so far been approved by the Wolesi Jirga.

US forces training Afghan villagers to watch for Taliban

The Washington Post

05/03/2010

By Rajiv Chandrasekaran

ARGHANDAB DISTRICT - Taliban fighters used to swagger with impunity through this farming village, threatening to assassinate government collaborators. They seeded the main thoroughfare, a dirt road with moonlike craters, with land mines. They paid local men to attack US and Afghan troops.

Then, beginning in late February, a small detachment of US Special Forces soldiers organized nearly two dozen villagers into an armed Afghan-style neighborhood watch group.

These days, the bazaar is thriving. The schoolhouse has reopened. People in the area have become confident enough to report Taliban activity to the village defense force and the police. As a consequence, insurgent attacks have nearly ceased and US soldiers have not hit a single roadside bomb in the area in two months, according to the detachment.

“Everyone feels safer now,” said Nasarullah, one of two gray-bearded tribal elders in charge of the village force. “Nobody worries about getting killed anymore.”

The rapid and profound changes have generated excitement among top US military officials in Afghanistan, fueling hope that such groups could reverse insurgent gains by providing the population a degree of protection that the police, the Afghan army and even international military forces have been unable to deliver.

But plans to expand the program have been stymied by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who fears the teams could turn into offensive militias, the sorts of which wreaked havoc on the country in the 1990s and prompted the rise of the Taliban. “This is playing with fire,” an Afghan government official said. “These groups may bring us security today, but what happens tomorrow?”

Citing Karzai’s objections, Karl Eikenberry, the US ambassador to Afghanistan, has blocked the release of money needed to broaden the initiative. He also has instructed State Department personnel in the country not to assist the effort until the Afghan government endorses it.

In addition to sharing Karzai’s concerns about what would happen to the local defense forces once US oversight ends, Eikenberry and other embassy officials worry that the program would weaken the central government in the eyes of the public and compete with efforts to build up the nation’s army and police.

“At the end of the day, how sustainable would a program like this be?” said a State Department official based in Kabul, who like other officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal disputes.

“It runs counter to the goal of giving the state a monopoly of force.”

The military’s interest in local-defense initiatives is driven in large part by President Obama’s July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawing combat forces, which has increased pressure on commanders to demonstrate clear progress in their counterinsurgency mission this year.

Some military officials have expressed frustration that US diplomats in Kabul have not done more to lobby Karzai and other Afghan officials to change their minds.

Iran asked to stop executing Afghans

Pajhwok

05/04/2010

By Rahmatullah Afghan

KABUL - Thousands of people on Sunday rallied in this central capital against the Iranian government demanding an immediate halt to the process of executing Afghan death-row prisoners in the neighboring country, where several immigrants were reportedly burnt to death recently.

The demonstrators gathered near the Iranian embassy in Kabul Sunday morning chanted slogans against the Iranian government for what they called committing atrocities on Afghans.

The protest comes amid reports that six Afghan refugees, held on the charge of smuggling drugs, were recently hanged by the Iranian authorities. Some Afghan MPs, representing Herat province on the Iranian border, said about 45 Afghan immigrants had been executed across the border on the Iranian soil.

The angry protestors turned onto the streets a day after some members of the Lower House of Parliament claimed the body parts of Afghan citizens, executed in Iran, were removed.

An MP, Ramazan Bashardost, Saturday stressed on a protest movement against the Iranian government. "If we pour onto on the streets, a million of Kabul residents would join us", he has said.

The former presidential candidate suggested the protestors should encircle the Iranian embassy till Tehran stopped its cruel treatment of Afghans.

Shouting "death to Ahmadinejad", the Iranian president, and "down with Iran", the angry Afghan protestors demanded an immediate halt to the cruel behavior with Afghan refugees.

Iranian security personnel raided the houses of Afghan refugees in the central Iranian city of Yezd, killing four and wounding 110 others, according to reports. The raids took place after an Afghan immigrant killed an Iranian national in the city.

Sunday's demonstration in Kabul was organised by a political party, Masharikat-e Mili, led by a Kabul MP, Najibullah Kabuli.

"The houses of Afghan immigrants were torched in Mahrez area of city," Kabuli told Pajhwok Afghan News.

Iranian forces irresponsibly enter the houses of Afghan refugees, said Kabuli, who alleged the Iranian forces had brutally killed a couple after taking them from their house.

He said the protest was arranged to show their anger against the killing of Afghan immigrants.

"I share the grief with my brothers who are tortured in Iran," one of the protestors, said.

Muhammadullah Ahmadi urged the International Community to force the Iranian government to stop the execution of innocent Afghans. The demonstration that started from the Iranian Embassy at about 8:00am concluded at the Shahr-i-Naw Park at 10:30am.

A resolution read out at the end of the demonstration urged the closure of a particular camp in which Afghan refugees were punished. The Iranian ambassador to Kabul must be summoned by Foreign Ministry to explain the inhuman action against Afghans, the resolution urged.

It added the execution of Afghans was against the human rights and the bilateral relations between the two countries.

Iran summons Afghan charge d'affaires

Press TV, Islamic Republic of Iran
05/04/2010

Iran's Foreign Ministry has summoned Afghanistan's charge d'affaires to Tehran over the irresponsible remarks made by some Afghan officials about Iran.

The Foreign Ministry's West Asia director-general described the recent irresponsible

statements made by some Afghan officials about Iran as suspicious.

Seyd Masoum Badakhsh, the Afghan charge d'affaires, expressed regret over the incident and said that he would notify his government of Tehran's displeasure.

Some Afghan newspapers launched a propaganda campaign against the Islamic Republic by covering baseless reports about the alleged "mistreatment" of Afghan refugees residing in the country.

There are nearly one million UN-registered Afghan refugees in Iran, with another million estimated to be unregistered. Iran and Afghanistan share a 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) border.

Iran has provided more than USD 350 million in aid to Afghanistan since the removal of the Taliban from power in 2001.

The Afghan charge d'affaires was summoned due to the absence of Afghanistan's ambassador in Iran.

British and US accused of poppy plague warfare in Afghanistan

Telegraph, UK

05/06/2010

By Ben Farmer in Kabul

Britain and the US have been accused of launching secret biological warfare on Afghanistan's poppy fields in a bid to blight the opium crop.

Poppy plants have been suffering from a mysterious disease which leaves them yellow and withered and slashes the yield of opium resin which is sold on and processed into heroin.

The worst affected farmers have said the scale of the infection is unprecedented. Yields have dropped by up to 90 per cent in some fields they complained.

Farmers are claiming that the British and Americans are responsible for the outbreak of the poppy plague but officials have both strongly denied involvement.

Samples of diseased plants are awaiting tests in Kabul and the cause remains unclear.

The blight was first noticed a month ago with reports it was linked to an infestation of aphids in wheat and fruit trees. It has since been found in four provinces across the south.

Early surveys suggest half the crop in northern Helmand is affected and a fifth of fields in the province's south. Symptoms have been spotted in Kandahar, Zabol and Uruzgan.

The United Nations said the disease would contribute to a significant drop in the opium harvest from last year's total of nearly 7,000 tonnes.

The country grows about 90 per cent of the world's opium. Tithes and protection money from the drug trade are estimated to give up to £60m a year to the Taliban-led insurgency.

The allies have spent billions of pounds trying to cut opium cultivation, but have rejected crop spraying, fearing that robbing farmers of their livelihood will push them to the militants.

The British-led anti-drugs strategy has instead tried to wean farmers from opium on to wheat, saffron and fruit.

British officials in Helmand are now trying to counter the rumours of international involvement in the outbreak, fearing they will be used by the Taliban to alienate farmers from Nato troops.

Abdul Ahmad, a 39-year-old farmer from Helmand's Gereshk district, said he expected his opium crop to fall from 154lbs last year to 15lbs this year.

He said: "We have had disease before although nothing like this. There were little insects in the trees and the wheat, but they are only harming the opium." "I said first this is a disease because of the insects. Now people are saying foreigners have sprayed some kind of chemical from planes."

Ahmad Jan, a 25-year-old farmer from Nad-i-Ali district, said: "We cannot be certain this is a disease. Most people think this is a chemical spray." Prior to the outbreak, the UN had estimated the 2010 crop would be similar to last year.

Jean-Luc Lemahieu, head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Afghanistan, said: "Samples are at the lab and we are at this moment not sure if it is a fungus or some insect.

"Spraying has been forbidden in very clear words by the President of Afghanistan. Hence, awaiting the results from our lab tests, we start with the belief that this is a natural phenomenon."

Fighting and opium seizures had already been credited with pushing farm gate opium prices up by 19 per cent since last year as speculators bet on reduced supply.

An international official in Helmand said there was "absolutely" no US or British involvement. He said: "The government of Afghanistan are not using any kind of spraying and there's nothing else going on either."

16 arrested for plotting attacks

The Associated Press

05/07/2010

By Jamey Keaten, Amir Shah

KABUL — Afghan police in recent weeks have arrested 16 people who were plotting suicide and rocket attacks in the capital and are hunting for other suspects, top security officials said Thursday.

The officials hailed the arrests as a sign that the ability of police to uncover such plots is improving and bringing more stability to the country.

Interior Minister Hanif Atmar said all but two of the suspects were detained in Kabul, and six were Pakistani nationals.

Kabul police Chief Abdul Rahman Rahman said the suspects admitted to investigators that they had ties to two al-Qaida-linked groups, Hizb-i-Islami and the Haqqani network.

"Of course, it is a big victory," Rahman told The Associated Press. He credited improved police intelligence cooperation inside and outside the city and said that citizens are increasingly trusting and cooperating with authorities.

Rahman said members of the Haqqani network, an Afghan Taliban group based in Pakistan, were planning suicide attacks in the capital. Members of Hezb-i-Islami, led by former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, were planning rocket attacks, he said.

The suicide attacks were to target government offices, a university and police headquarters, he said. Authorities were led to the suspects as part of an investigation into a roadside bombing in the capital's Musayi district that killed two officers, Rahman said.

"In the space of 24 hours, they confessed and gave more names — and in the coming weeks, God willing, I hope that more suspects will be arrested," he said.

The arrests suggest the security situation in Kabul could be improving, Rahman said. "But the enemy is looking for a (security) hole to infiltrate" and are willing to wait weeks or months to plan and conduct attacks, he added.

The officials were speaking on the sidelines of a ceremony honoring new elite officers who completed a 22-week training program led by French gendarmes with expertise in both military and police techniques.

French Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux attended the ceremonies to congratulate the 50 cadets, who trained in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif under the European Gendarmerie Force program.

Hortefeux said France in the coming days would send 40 more gendarmes to a new police training site in the central Wardak region, bringing the total commitment of French gendarme trainers to 190 in Afghanistan.

Hortefeux also said Atmar had told him that Afghan authorities had received "tangible proof" that two France-3 television journalists kidnapped in eastern Afghanistan on Dec. 30 were "alive and in good health." He declined to elaborate, citing the sensitivity of the matter.

Separately, NATO announced a service member was killed Thursday by a roadside bomb in southern Afghanistan. The death came a day after another service member died in a small-arms attack in the south.

The international force did not identify the victims or their nationalities. Eight NATO members have been killed in Afghanistan so far this month.

The alliance is gearing up for a military campaign this summer in the south. The U.S.-led operation will try to clear the southern city of Kandahar of Taliban fighters in what will be a critical test of the war.

Also Thursday, hundreds of Afghans shouting "Death to Iran" gathered outside the Iranian Embassy in Kabul, saying Afghan refugees who live in the country face abuse. About 1 million Afghan refugees live in Iran.

Thousands of acres of land illegal grabbed in north

Pajhwok

05/07/2010

By Zabihullah Ihsas

MAZAR-I-SHARIF (PAN): Powerful men had forcefully captured thousands of acres of land in northern provinces, locals and officials said.

The land had been seized in Balkh, Samangan, Sar-i-Pul and Jawzjan provinces, said members of a delegation reviewing the situation of the captured land in the zone.

The nomadic Kuchis and livestock owners also complained that the government had assigned them some chunks of green land where they could graze their herds, but the same was forcefully captured by some powerful people who do not allow them to take their herds there.

Allauddin, a nomad from Sadmesh of Chamtal district of Balkh province, said the land was captured by the powerful individuals over the past three years. Without naming any one, he said they were not allowing them to graze their herds there.

Gulbaz, another resident of Sholgar district of the same province, said he had a herd of nearly 100 sheep but could not find a place for their grazing. He said they were going to far-off areas to find grazing grounds for their cattle.

Officials in the Balkh province also admit that the powerful men had captured the grazing fields. Sayed Muhammad Ariq, an official responsible for Kuchis affairs, told Pajhwok Afghan News that around 20,000 Kuchi families were living in the province. He said according to an estimate, the total number of their cattle is more than 10 million.

He said most of the Kuchis were living in Sholgar, Chamtal, Khlam, Daulatabad, Charbolak, Zara and Kashandi districts of Balkh province. He said their grazing grounds were being grabbed by some people over the past few years.

In this connection, the government had formed a delegation to review the situation and take steps to get back the land. A member of the delegation Zulfiqar Stanikzai said hundreds of acres of land had been captured in the four provinces.

He said the Balkh province had vast grazing fields but a major part of the same was captured by the powerful men. He said in some areas, houses of nomadic Kuchis had also been captured.

Besides Balkh, hundreds of acres of land had also been grabbed in Samangan.

Dawa Khan, resident of Hazrat Sultan district of the province said thousands acres of land was captured in the area over the past few years. He said they complained to the government again and again but not step was taken to address their problems. Another Kuchi Saida Gul also came out with similar complaints.

Zulfiqar says 60 per cent of the grazing fields in that province were seized by the powerful men. Same is the situation in the other two provinces, he added.

He said commissions had been formed to review the situation and adopt corrective measures. He assured that the land would be retaken and given to its real owners.

Geo-Strategic Headlines

Karzai to seek Obama's approval for peace deals with insurgents

The Washington Post

05/03/2010

By Joshua Partlow

KABUL -- The most meaningful part of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to Washington next week may end up being talks about talks.

Karzai's advisers say one of his main goals for the May 12 meeting is winning President Obama's support for negotiating with insurgent leaders, and for a Kabul peace conference that has been delayed until after the visit.

Although Karzai appears wary of a political deal with the Taliban that might threaten his power, diplomats in Kabul say he is interested in smaller-scale negotiations with individual commanders from the Taliban and another insurgent group, Hezb-e-Islami.

The prospect of high-level talks with the Taliban still appears far off, complicated by divisions within the Afghan government, uneasiness from the United States, and no clear sign that the Taliban wants to participate.

Still, after months of delay, Karzai's government has clarified its position, sketching out a two-track plan: pursuing political accommodation with insurgent leaders, while at the same time enticing foot soldiers with jobs and foreign-funded development projects.

"One without the other is unsustainable. This is our position," said a senior Afghan official.

A draft of the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Plan, expected to be presented at the peace conference, is circulating in Kabul. It states the importance of a political settlement, but it has no road map for getting there, according to Afghan officials familiar with the document. The plan alludes vaguely to generating momentum for dialogue by removing more Taliban names from the United Nations sanctions list and offering exile to insurgents outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan, they said.

The bulk of the document focuses on the less controversial issue of reintegration, which involves shepherding lower-level insurgents back to society.

Under the proposal, if a Taliban member wants amnesty, he must renounce violence and accept the Afghan constitution. Then he must submit to fingerprinting and retinal scans, and his neighbors or tribesmen must vouch for his sincerity. The next step would be courses in literacy and Islam, followed by a manual-labor job.

The plan envisions that provincial and district officials will reach out to insurgents with the offer. The initial focus would be in volatile provinces such as Kandahar, Helmand and Kunduz, Afghan officials said.

But there is a chasm between such proposals and what the Afghan government seems capable of accomplishing. A host of other mismanaged and underfunded Afghan programs have failed in the past to persuade large numbers of insurgents to stop fighting.

Afghan officials hope to sidestep previous failures by building more bureaucracy. Under Karzai's leadership, a "High Level Peace Council" -- including parliament members, military officers and possibly former insurgents -- would be formed to set policy on reconciliation and reintegration. Below this council, a new secretariat run by a cabinet-level chief executive would have responsibility for day-to-day management and coordinate with NATO and U.N. officials. Foreign donors have pledged about \$160 million for reintegration.

Perhaps the main barrier to the success of such efforts is the deep mistrust that has developed between insurgents and the government over nearly nine years of war. Insurgents who join the reintegration program would have little protection from former comrades, and the incentives are hardly alluring.

"The fundamental problem with reintegration is the dissonance between motives of fighters and what reintegration has to offer, most of which is about job opportunities," said Matt Waldman, a Harvard University researcher who has written about reintegration and recently interviewed several current and former Taliban commanders. "They're not fighting for jobs."

Instead, he said, they are fed up with what they see as a profiteering and exclusionary government that has strayed from Islamic principles, and they oppose the presence of nearly 100,000 U.S. troops in their country.

Some U.S. officials worry that the Afghan government will have problems getting the message out to its army and police, which could kill or capture those insurgents who have gained amnesty.

Many Afghans, in and out of the government, oppose any outreach to the Taliban. Within the past six weeks, both of Karzai's vice presidents, Mohammed Fahim and Karim Khalili, have said the president could be killed if the Taliban gets a foothold in the government, according to a foreign diplomat in Kabul.

Fahim and Khalili were both members of the Northern Alliance, which led the overthrow of the Taliban government with U.S. assistance in 2001. Former Northern Alliance commanders think "the whole idea of bringing [militants] in is antithetical to us: 'We fought them and won, we don't want them back,' " said a senior U.S. military official in Kabul.

Even to Afghan supporters of Taliban outreach, there is skepticism that amnesty for individual foot soldiers will change the war, particularly during a U.S. troop buildup and an upcoming military offensive in Kandahar.

U.S. military officials want "to put pressure on insurgents and try to pave the way to a political deal," said a senior Afghan official. "But killings, targeting, doesn't help. We've been killing them for the past nine years."

"You either talk of peace or you talk of war," the official said.

Karzai arrives Monday for four-day Washington visit

AFP

05/07/2010

WASHINGTON — The United States will next week seek to ease public spats with President Hamid Karzai, but also imply that its alliance with Afghanistan is not solely defined by its volatile relationship with him.

President Barack Obama will welcome Karzai to the White House on Wednesday, the highpoint of the visit, which represents an apparent effort by both sides to overcome an embarrassing public row last month.

But the Afghan leader will also bring a large delegation that will get a red carpet welcome at US government departments -- in another sign Washington is wary of placing its substantial bet in Afghanistan on Karzai alone.

"One of the things that we wanted to underscore with this visit was again the development of a very broad strategic partnership," said Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security advisor for strategic communications.

"The cooperation that we have with the Afghans extends to many different sectors."

"We really are developing in Afghanistan a very deep set of collaborations with Afghan ministers, as well as at the more subnational and local level, too."

Karzai will arrive in Washington on Monday, and will hold in-depth talks at the State Department with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton the next day.

He will spend more than three hours with Obama at the White House on Wednesday -- an unusually large allocation of time for Obama and a foreign leader.

The White House said the two leaders would hold Oval Office talks, have a joint press

conference and then lunch. On Thursday, Karzai will visit Arlington Cemetery, where some of the US dead from the Afghan war are buried.

The Obama administration has made no secret of its frustration with Karzai, over his record of governance and tackling corruption, though officials briefing reporters Friday appeared to be keen to stress some areas of success.

US officials made clear when the Obama made a surprise visit to Afghanistan in that they were unhappy with Karzai's performance since he started his second term in November.

Karzai seemed irked by US criticisms, and after the US president left, fired off a series of outbursts, accusing foreign nations of orchestrated corruption in presidential elections, which were angrily dismissed by Washington.

At one stage, it even seemed that Karzai's planned May 12 visit could be in doubt.

Douglas Lute, the US president's special assistant for Afghanistan and Pakistan said Friday that a partnership such as that between the United States and Afghanistan was bound to have "ups and downs."

"But the difference between a mere relationship and a partnership, like the one that we're talking about here, is that partnerships endure the ups and downs and continue to press forward towards the common goals."

Social Headlines

Planning to build four mega water dams underway

Pajhwok

05/04/2010

By Abdul Qadir Siddique

KABUL - Work on the construction of four mega water dams to meet irrigation and water needs would be launched in three months in four provinces in the country, an official said on Sunday.

The dams to be built included the Almar Dam in northern Faryab, Machalgho Dam in southeastern Paktia, Shah Wa Aroos Dam in Kabul and Pashan Dam in Herat, said Shujauddin Ziayee, Deputy Minister for Water and Energy.

Speaking at a press conference here, Ziayee said the projects would cost \$220 millions, which would be provided by the Afghan government. Contracts regarding the schemes would soon be signed with private construction companies, he added. The construction work would be completed in three years, said the deputy minister, who added the initial survey of the dams had been completed.

"The dams in Baghlan, Sar-i-Pul and Faryab provinces have also been surveyed and it is hoped the Finance Ministry will allocate funds for them in its next year's budget", he added.

The construction of Machalgho Dam in the Syed Karam district of Patika province is a much-awaited demanded of the dwellers, hoping the project would help irrigate their agricultural lands besides generating electricity.

A private company had proposed the construction costs at \$27 millions during the third phase of bidding, but the offer was rejected by the finance ministry. Ziayee said the forth round of the bidding would start soon.

The Machalgho Dam would have the capacity of producing 700 kilowatts of electricity and would irrigate 3,600 hectares of land, he further said.

According to the Ministry of Water and Energy, in total, the amount of rain and snowfall in Afghanistan makes 57 billion cubic meters of water annually. Of it, 30 percent can be used in the country but the rest ends up in neighbouring countries.

Second VP, ministers accused of embezzling a million dollars

Pajhwok

05/05/2010

By Khwaja Basir Ahmad

KABUL - Hajj and Auqaf ministry's cashier has accused second vice president and seven ministers of embezzling one million of dollars during last year's Haj ritual.

Haji Mohammad Noor, who was arrested seven months back with \$3, 62,000 at Kabul airport on his way back home from Saudi Arabia, told an open hearing of Criminal Justice task Force (CJTF) of the Counter-narcotics Ministry on Monday the second VP Karim Khalili and the ministers were the real culprits behind the fraud.

Intelligence officials had accused the cashier of being involved in the embezzlement of money taken from 23 travel agencies during last year's Haj rite and that he transferred the money secretly to the country.

However, during his hearing, Noor said, " I have nothing to do with this as I am just a cashier. How can I be given bribe?" He said he was just following the orders for transferring the money.

He requested the court to arrest Khalili and the seven ministers, who he did not name. He said 23 private travel agencies and Haj operation commission embezzled the amount.

Khalili was part of the Haj Operation Commission which is supposed to ensure a safe travel to and from Saudi Arabia of Afghan pilgrims.

Prosecutors Ibrahim Ghafari and Ahmad Rashid Totakhel who filed the case against Noor Mohammad said Noor facilitated the deal between the then Haj and Auqaf minister, Siddiq Chakari, and the private travel agencies both in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia.

They also accused Noor of receiving \$150 from each pilgrim in Afghanistan by illegally enrolling them in traveling list and providing them accommodation in Saudi Arabia.

Of the total embezzled amount through this process, the prosecutors said, \$500,000 went to Chakari and 362,000 pocketed by Mohammad Noor.

Noor agreed with the prosecutors, but said he did this on the behest of Chakari. He said he had to obey his orders as his subordinate.

About the 25 million afghanis embezzled amount, Noor said he withdrew it from the Da Afghanistan Bank (central bank) on the behest of Chakari for accommodating Afghan pilgrims in Saudi Arabia. He said only five million afghanis were spent there and when was bringing back the remaining money from Saudi Arabia, he was arrested at the Kabul Airport. He said Chakari ordered him to bring back the money to Afghanistan.

He said he told Chakari that he could not transfer such a big amount of money to the country but he said there would be no problem.

Siddiq Chakari is currently in London, England who has been formally indicted by Afghan Attorney General Office (AGO). The AGO asked Interpol officially to arrest Chakari and extradite him to Afghanistan, but no one knows what happened to him.

Flood claims 14 lives in W. Afghanistan

Xinhua
05/05/2010

Heavy rain and flooding in the militancy-hit Afghanistan's western Herat province claimed the lives of 14 people including seven children and three women on Wednesday, Provincial Governor Ahmad Yousuf Nuristani said.

"The natural disaster occurred in Aobi district in the wee hours today leaving 14 people dead and five others missing as well as damaging over 250 house," Nuristani told Xinhua.

About 30 people were also injured in the tragic incident, he said.

According to governor over 300 hectares of farm lands were also washed away or damaged in the natural disaster.

Meantime, an official with the Afghan Red Crescent Society in the province Nuroddin Ahmadi put the number of victims to 22 and the injured persons to over 50, adding hundreds of animals were also wiped away in the flooding.

Ex-female govt servant found beheaded in Zabul

Pajhwok
05/06/2010
By Bismillah Pashtunmal

QALAT - A headless body of a former female government employee was found dumped on a roadside in southern Zabul province early Monday, an official and witnesses said.

The body of Zakira was found in the Kharwaryan area on the outskirts of the provincial capital, Qalat, on the Kabul-Kandahar Highway early this morning, said a local police official, who asked not to be named.

Though it was not clear who killed the woman, police had arrested a suspect in the case, he added.

Niamtullah, resident of the area, said the slain woman was a former government employee.

Zakira had worked in various government departments in the past, but she was unemployed recently, he added.

Jamila, a friend of the victim, said Zakira was threatened by Taliban fighters to quit her job as a government employee prior to the killing. She said Zakira was dragged out of her home and stabbed and killed later.

When women's affairs department officials were contacted, they said they had inadequate information about the incident and were not ready to comment. There was no claim of responsibility for the murder.

Two years back, a woman working at a regional office of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) was killed in the same province, lying on Kabul-Kandahar highway. Only one female lawmaker represents Zabul at the Afghan parliament.

Locals flee Marja as insecurity rises

Pajhwok

05/06/2010

By Zainullah Stanikzai

LASHKARGAH - A large number of locals have fled Marja district due to an increasing insurgency in the former Taliban stronghold, which was captured in a major offensive in February.

The operation, which involved 15,000 foreign and Afghan forces, was called a success in wiping the Taliban out of the district and restoring peace in Marja, north of Lashkargah, the capital of southern Helmand province.

However, locals say Taliban militants have returned and insurgency are on rise once again, forcing villagers to leave the district.

"Fighting was still there and there was widespread insecurity in the district," said Abdul Sattar, who left Marja for Lashkargah. "People cannot continue their routine life and they are facing more problems."

Another Marja resident, Sardar Wali, said Taliban were present in many parts of the district. He added that the recent operation was a failure as now both Taliban and foreign troops had caused trouble for people.

The head of the charity, the Red Crescent Society, in the province, Ahmadullah Ahmadi, said more than 500 families had migrated to Lashkargah due to insecurity.

He called on the local government to provide immediate help to displaced people.

However, the spokesman for Helmand governor, Dawood Ahmadi, said fighting was not the reason for the massive displacement.

In reality, he said, those families had gone to Marja -- the former hub for the Taliban narco-trade -- to get their poppy harvest and after completing the job, they had returned to the provincial capital.

Economical Headlines

Afghanistan supersedes Pak in tea import

PPT

05/01/2010

KARACHI - Afghanistan has taken over third position in tea import from Kenya during the quarter ending March, pushing down Pakistan to fourth slot.

Former chairman Pakistan Tea Association Mohammad Hanif Janoo said here Friday while quoting tea export data of January-March 2010 and January-March 2009 released by Lindop & Co, Mombasa, Kenya.

He said Pakistan imported 15.236 million kilo of tea worth 3.745 billion Kenyan shilling during three months of 2010 while Afghanistan imported 17.311 million of kg tea worth 4.444 billion Kenyan shilling during the same period.

During the same period last year Pakistan was ranked third with 13.790 million kg of tea followed by Afghanistan with 8.886 million kg of tea import.

Egypt and United Kingdom are the top tea importers in the world with 25.376 million kg and 22.500m kg of tea during January - March 2010.

Janoo said that most of this tea finds its way back in Pakistan after being imported under ATT facility, inflicting a colossal loss not only to the national exchequer but also the bonafied tea importers in Pakistan. Pakistan imported 54.638m kilo of tea worth \$ 149.710m during Jan - Dec 2009, while Afghanistan imported 33.443m kilo of tea worth \$98.991m during the same period. It may be noted that Unilever Pakistan Ltd has alleged in its financial results sent to KSE on April 24, that half of the tea consumed in Pakistan is smuggled through the misuse of ATT.

The company said that the government is losing nearly Rs 8 billion in taxes due to this smuggling.