

Stealth sexism in Parliament, children at the rough end, mellow yellow takes the biscuit, cashmere cohorts and any car you like so long as it's a Corolla. Compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Services

Afghan women lose political power : A legal requirement that women make up at least a quarter of all provincial elected officials has been quietly removed.

There are fears that President Karzai's government is increasingly willing to trade away women's advances to coax the Taliban to the peace table.

Most women in the upper house serve because of their role as elected provincial officials.

The law had previously set aside for women at least a quarter of seats in some 400 district and 34 provincial councils. Seventeen of 28 women in the upper house are appointed by Karzai. The remaining 11 must be chosen from among women sitting on district and provincial councils.

The change was approved by parliament's lower house, the Wolesi Jirga, on May 22. Prominent parliamentarian Fawzia Koofi said female members did not discover the change until last week.

"It's undemocratic to grant a seat to a woman even though a man had more votes, simply because the law favours her," said Qazi Nasir Ahmad Hanafi, head of the legislative commission.

The law needs approval from the upper house and from Karzai.

Bad Year for Children.

Ongoing conflict in Afghanistan means the number of child casualties in the first four months of 2013 was 414 - a 28 percent jump from the 327 last year, according to the UN Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict. Of the 414 child casualties, 121 were killed and 293 injured.

"Afghanistan remains one of the world's most difficult and dangerous places to be a child," said a UNICEF spokesman.

From 2010 to 2012, the UN report says 4,025 children were killed or seriously wounded as a result of the conflict in Afghanistan.

Child casualties for the country totalled 1,304 for 2012. IEDs remain the leading killer, contributing to 37 percent of the 414 conflict-related child casualties. Children caught in crossfire made up 20 percent of the child-casualties; "explosive remnants of war" - 18 percent; with the remainder attributed to other causes.

The government and armed opposition groups have laws and regulations prohibiting child soldiers and bombers, but both continue to use them.

Findings from the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) 2013 torture report show of the 105 child detainees interviewed, 80 (76 percent) experienced torture or abuse at the hands of Afghan security forces.

Sexual violence remains one of the most under-reported abuses. Bacha-bazi - the "owning" of a boy for sexual purposes, usually by the rich and powerful, is a taboo subject.

"The reality is that it is very widespread and it's very prevalent in the Afghan society... The society is not ready to face that this problem exists and something has to be done," said one analyst.

Children under 18 make up 46 percent of refugees worldwide. A record number of asylum seekers submitting applications in 2012 came from children.

Conflict is the main cause, said the report.

No. 1 Afghan Saffron

The Afghan Ministry of Commerce and Industry announced that the Afghan Saffron Company was awarded the first place in saffron production by the International Taste and Quality Institute.

The company operates in the field of production, processing, packaging and marketing of saffron.

Saffron is one the country's most important export goods, exported across Europe.

The award was officially given to Mr. Humayun Tandar, Afghan Ambassador to Belgium, as a representative for the Company.

The award of the Institute is valid for three years. The certificate holder can export its products to the European Union (EU) markets as well as markets around the world.

The Men who Dehair Goats

A Yorkshire textile company has teamed up with Afghan goat farmers in a Pentagon plan to promote Afghanistan's cashmere industry.

Philip Eddleston, former managing director of Pringle, who has worked with the textile industries of Vietnam, Bulgaria and Mongolia, now turns to dyers and weavers in Yorkshire and Scotland to fill gaps in Afghan expertise.

He said the country had little brand presence in the market despite being the world's third-largest cashmere producer, with 7 per cent of output.

Afghanistan will gradually to build its own manufacturing capability as part of broader US efforts to help develop the economy. Most Afghan wool is currently processed in China.

Production has several stages: dehairing, scouring, washing away the impurities, weaving yarn and dyeing. They each add value, with the margin rising from \$5 to \$100 per kg of wool.

Mr Eddleston has also set up a joint venture with an Indian producer and the Herat Cashmere and Skins Company, which has some scouring and dehairing capability. A new goat farm will produce breeding stock, and teach farmers how to get the best wool from their animals.

King of the road

In a city where roads in even the most affluent neighbourhoods are riddled with potholes, the Toyota Corolla makes up 80% of vehicles on the streets of Kabul.

Black, blue, green, yellow or white, some have tinted windows, some don't. Others have a curved chassis or square headlights. White is favoured because it doesn't show the dirt. Stickers on rear windscreens reading: "Beautiful Corolla", "Super Saloon Corolla" and "Corolla I love you."

On one 10-minute drive between the centre of the capital and the embassy district, a reporter counted 194 Corollas, compared with 89 of all other vehicles — cars, buses, trucks and security

vehicles. Experts can recognize whether the vehicle came originally from North America or Europe from the size of the bumper or the position of the license plate. Almost all taxis are Corollas. Customers who call a cab are told to look out for a "grey 2002" or a "brown 2007."

A old banger costs \$3,500, while last year's model with low mileage goes for \$26,000. Import duties are about \$5,000, plus \$1,500 for licensing and other taxes on top.

Shaker Bakhter, a Kabul dealer, says he has sold at least 10,000 Corollas in his career. Their ubiquity makes them the weapon of choice for Taliban car bombers. A character in the film 'Zero Dark Thirty', tracking the white SUV that leads the CIA to bin Laden's Abbottabad compound, remarks on the car's distinctiveness; if the courier had been driving a sedan (or a Corolla), they would never have been able to keep tabs.

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