

Afghan News Roundup of news you might have missed, compiled by Elayne Jude, Great North News Service

Kabul's Sex Workers Get Organised

Prostitutes in Afghanistan's capital have organised into a clandestine self-help network to halt the spread of disease, avoid detection by the state and flag abusive customers.

Freshta, a prostitute, has been visiting Kabul's beauty parlours—many of them fronts for the flesh trade—to teach colleagues about condom use and encourage them to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases. "If we don't do this work, who will?" she said. "They'll go back and spread their diseases to the entire beauty parlour and then to the families."

Prostitution in Afghanistan, by men and by women, is largely a hidden world, and much that is known about it is anecdotal, from the sex workers themselves.

The risks of violent attack are high for male prostitutes as well, sex workers say, with little legal recourse; those who dress as women can be subject to arrest by police, who view the practice as immoral, though it isn't illegal.

The Kabul police are cracking down on "moral crimes" such as prostitution, alcohol consumption, gambling and sodomy, said Gen. Mohammed Zaher, head of the police criminal investigation department. Convicted prostitutes are ordinarily given six-month jail sentences; their clients tend not to be arrested, though solicitation is illegal.

The sex trade apparently remains brisk in Kabul. Members of the recently established self-help network in the Afghan capital say it encompasses some 6,000 female prostitutes and 4,000 males, though these numbers couldn't be verified.

Part of the network's function is to alert the prostitutes about the clients who beat or rob them, sharing an informal blacklist. Many of these prostitutes come from outside the capital, telling their families they work as maids, day laborers or government clerks. On the streets, they usually don the all-enveloping blue burqas that most Afghan women wear.

Peer educators within the network teach fellow sex workers who have turned tricks for years about condoms, a relative novelty in Afghanistan, and about how to prevent STDs. HIV is still rare in Afghanistan: None of the sex workers in the Kabul network tested positive, said doctors who were hired by the prostitutes to conduct blood tests. Other sexually-transmitted diseases are more of a problem, especially hepatitis C, which is endemic in the country. Kabul prostitutes in the network say they distribute some 9,000 condoms a month and pamphlets on deadly infections.

Female prostitutes say they can earn up to \$1,200 for a night with a wealthy man and as little as \$20 with regular customers, big money in the capital where monthly wages for most women hover around \$150.

Male prostitutes can also earn good pay. Sohail, 20, said he was earning at least \$100 a night singing and dancing, his face caked with the makeup—light foundation and rosy cheeks—that is a signature of his trade. For sex, he can earn more. "I have slept with more men than the hairs on my head," he said, stopping in at a makeshift clinic to get tested for STDs.

Most male prostitutes in Kabul begin working as so-called dancing boys, a traditional practice in which boys as young as six are sold by their impoverished families to wealthy men, taught to wear makeup and dresses and dance for their patrons, and eventually used for sex. When the boys start to grow beards, they are usually abandoned by their companions. Illiterate and unable to find work, they often turn to prostitution, according to doctors working with the network.

The Afghan doctors who are paid to run the blood tests once every three months say they are reluctant participants, employed because they are unable to find other work. "I worry that if the community knows, they will attack us. Or if the Taliban knows, they will slit me," a male doctor said in broken English, running a finger across his throat.

Not everyone is as concerned about the Taliban, who executed prostitutes and adulterers at Kabul's packed main stadium. Shafiq, a madam and a peer educator, also in her 30s, said she started as a sex worker when she was 17 and the Taliban ruled Kabul. Taliban officials, she recalls, weren't nearly as pious in private.

"The Taliban days were better. They paid us cash," Shafiq said. "Now they all want to do it on credit, even the government officials."

Fuel and corruption; a joint operation

This month, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) sent an interim report to Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta and top Pentagon officers associated with Afghanistan. The report criticized how the U.S. military is preparing to turn over to the Afghan National Army the buying of petroleum, oil and lubricants estimated next year to involve \$343 million in U.S. taxpayer funds and another \$123 million from international donors.

The funding is based on an estimate of the Afghan National Army's needs. SIGAR found that the program after transition will be vulnerable to theft and waste because the United States and its allies do not have a valid method for estimating ANA fuel needs, nor records on its past fuel purchases, deliveries and consumption.

John F. Sopko, the special inspector general, told a House Oversight subcommittee on Sept. 13 that fuel is a valuable commodity that is vulnerable to theft.

In October, a US Army sergeant pleaded guilty to approving fake documents that allowed

truckers to steal \$1.5 million of fuel from a forward operating base in 2010. In August, a former US Army sergeant pleaded guilty to soliciting \$400,000 in a similar plot that involved stealing \$1.4 million of fuel in 2010 from another forward operating base. In June, two US Army servicemen pleaded guilty in a plot to steal jet fuel from a base and getting \$6,000 for clandestinely filling 3,000-gallon trucks owned by an Afghan contractor.

Sopko told the House panel that his office has 20 active criminal investigations looking into the theft and diversion of fuel or bribery or bid-rigging on fuel contracts, involving more than \$100 million.

The SIGAR inquiry found that US coalition financial records, covering \$475 million in fuel purchases and payments from October 2006 to February 2011, had been shredded, in violation of DOD and Department of the Army policies.

SIGAR auditors were not given half the records sought for the March 2011 to March 2012 period. Although June 2012 Afghan army fuel purchases and payments were reconciled, the command could not account for the amount of fuel delivered and consumed, SIGAR said.

A July SIGAR report found that because the military command did not file claims for damaged or missing equipment, it was providing fuel for vehicles that had been destroyed.

Sopko said his audit found that in one case as much as 1 million gallons of fuel had been stolen over a four-month period without causing any red flags to be raised in the system.

Now, according to SIGAR, the U.S.-NATO command does not have accurate or supportable information on how much U.S. funds are needed for ANA fuel, where and how the fuel is actually used, or how much fuel has been lost or stolen.□

The command has taken actions to improve controls over fuel purchases, vendor deliveries, and the payment of invoice amounts. SIGAR maintains there is still a need to ensure all fuel activity is tracked and accounted for.

There may be a history of corruption in Afghanistan, but the US creates tempting, rich, new targets such as fuel, and it seems Americans are willing to join in the illegal action.

Anti-Measles Measures to Improve

Afghanistan is taking steps to improve its routine immunisation coverage, after a drop in coverage led to a sharp increase in measles outbreaks last year, killing more than 300 children.

Since November 2011, 9,000 measles cases were reported across almost every province in the country, as compared to 3,000 cases over the same period the year before. It was the culmination of several years of decreasing vaccination coverage due to rising insecurity, decreased access, difficult terrain and harsh winters that cut off thousands of villages. Last year's severe drought also contributed.

Routine immunization is supposed to cover measles, polio, Hepatitis B, Haemophilus influenza

type B, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus and tuberculosis.

"The main issue is access," said Maria Luisa Galer, the coordinator of the international aid community's health cluster in Afghanistan. "We probably have to revise and adapt the strategy to this context."

In its 2011-2015 plan for the National Immunization Programme, the Ministry of Public Health writes: "Considering the current constraints and challenges in Afghanistan, reaching 95 percent [measles vaccine] coverage nationally and at least 80 percent in each district through routine immunization services is not easily achievable."

According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the number of suspended or non-functional health facilities in Afghanistan increased by 40 percent between 2011 and 2012, reaching 540.

The Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS), the government programme responsible for healthcare delivery at the primary level, does not cover the whole country. "On paper it covers 80 percent, but practically it is close to 60 percent," said Islam Saeed, director of the government's Disease Early Warning System (DEWS). The rest is left to humanitarian NGOs and the private sector, but they, too, face challenges.

"Day by day, the [security] situation becomes worse and our access to the people for providing health services becomes more limited," said Sayed Zubair Sadat, responsible for the Afghan Red Crescent Society's 45 health clinics nationwide.

Experts say nearly 30 percent of the population has no or very poor access to primary health care, including immunization, and the percentage is estimated to be as high as 70 percent in areas of conflict in the south. In some communities, the closest health facility is 70km away. Last year, there were some districts where the government was not present at all. Where vaccinations do take place, quality can also be an issue.

As a new winter approaches, WHO is trying to prevent a repeat of last year. In July, it began an emergency nationwide measles vaccination campaign, vaccinating more than six million children. It is planning to continue with the remaining 18 provinces in November.

Health workers have pre-positioned medicines in areas that will be cut off during the winter; and established temporary sub-health centres to serve villagers in remote areas through the winter.

In some cases mobile health teams are helicoptered in. This is part of an approach to tailor immunization strategies to the specific context of an area, instead of applying "one blanket method for every province", Galer said. The government is also planning to use more female vaccinators, to increase access to women.

Afghanistan's first female rapper

Soosan Firooz is Afghanistan's first female rapper in a nascent hip-hop scene, where only a handful have begun to garner a following. Firooz is drawing international attention as the first

woman on the Afghan hip-hop scene, and butting heads with fundamentalist elements within her own country. She lives frugally with her family in north Kabul, working on an old desktop computer and a donated keyboard. She also works as an actress in local soap operas. Her father left his electrical department job to accompany her as a bodyguard, fearful of the death threats she has faced.

The act of making music here is a radical one. The gradual evolution of music censorship goes back to beginning of communist rule under Nur Muhammad Taraki in 1978. According to a 2001 article by John Baily, the Taliban's suppression of music is rooted in this period, when refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan enforced a total ban in order to preserve a constant state of mourning.

Firooz is no stranger to the camps. The 23 year old grew up in a camp in Iran in the 1990s and spent time as a refugee with her family in Pakistan. They returned to their native country seven years ago. This life story informs the one song she has released, a Dari-language single: "Hear my stories and hear/Hear my sorrows, my sadness/Hear the story of my displacement and homelessness/We were lost, we were lost, lost around the world." Her lyrics continue with the narration of life as a refugee, dreaming of their homeland and being treated as worthless abroad, ending with a call for hope and an end to abuses, to the invading and interfering forces of the west and of Pakistan and Iran. "From now on," she concludes, "it will be Afghanistan."

Brother of Kunduz MP Arrested for Hanging Wife

The brother of a Kunduz lawmaker was arrested in the northern province for allegedly hanging his wife. Zarghona, who was married to the brother of Kunduz MP Shukria Paikan, was killed in her home this month, by hanging.

Kunduz police said Zarghona's husband used a rope to hang his wife and was being detained until investigations were complete.

Northern 303 Pamir police zone spokesperson Lal Muhammad Ahmadzai said: "The reason of the murder is not yet clear but it seems that she was killed because of a family violation." The provincial women's department called for a thorough investigation.

"When we were alerted about the incident we went to the police. They said the cause is still under investigation and it is unclear," the women's department spokesperson said.

An Artist in His Own Country

Abdul Wasi Hamdard fled the Taliban in 1996 and joined a few million of his fellow Afghans as a refugee in Pakistan, separated from his family. He lived alone in a small room scarcely bigger than his bed, with a window, and an easel. "I painted from 9 p.m. until dawn every day," he says. "I was very happy then."

He produced 10,000 canvases over the years, oils and watercolours, establishing himself as one of Afghanistan's most successful young artists.

When the Taliban fell, Mr. Hamdard, then in his late 30s, returned, and Kabul's galleries snapped up his paintings. Few Afghans could afford them, but the capital was full of foreigners passing through for whom prices as low as \$100 a canvas were a steal.

"You can find one or two of my paintings in every corner of the world," he says.

The Norwegian and Indian Embassies held showings; the American Embassy even had a small gallery inside its compound, with Hamdards as a staple offering. He was often invited to art events, nearly always at embassies. His friend Karim Khosravi, a businessman and art lover, started the Bamiyan Gallery on Chicken Street and did well from his 30 percent commission on Mr. Hamdard's paintings. A Swedish woman helped start a website featuring his work.

The money poured in steadily. He moved into a large house with his seven brothers; taxi drivers and restaurant workers, government workers, shop clerks — people whose monthly salaries were often less than even an inexpensive Hamdard. He supported the entire family, and though he did not marry, his brothers did. The household swelled to 30.

Mr. Hamdard stopped painting at home; it was just too crowded. Yet he was honour- and culture-bound to remain with his brothers. Two of his family suffered from mental illness; his mother had a stroke and was paralyzed. Their house collapsed one day, and he had to rebuild it, exhausting his savings.

He worked in many genres, chiefly expressionist oils with a strong sense of Afghan place, often done with a palette knife instead of brush. Later, his output became more abstract expressionist, twisted and dark.

"I first met Hamdard in Islamabad," said Hedayat Amin Arsala, the senior minister in Karzai's government. "I sensed some vulnerability in him, very tormented somehow." Mr. Arsala was a patron for several Afghan artists, including Mr. Hamdard, and has followed his career since; he is one of the few Afghans who own the artist's work.

"He reminds me a lot of the painter in 'La Bohème,'" Mr. Arsala said. Like Marcello, Mr. Hamdard has never married, though he will not say why exactly. For years, his brothers tried to arrange a match, but he spurned all offers. "I could never find a woman who understood me," he says.

Many of what Mr. Hamdard considers his best paintings currently reside in the closet of a guesthouse run by a friend. They include "Brothers" and "The Fundamentalist," and what Mr. Hamdard says he calls his best work, a painting he originally called "Twenty Years of War." The war went on, the painting never sold, and he renamed it "Thirty Years of War."

Taliban attacks led to greater security restrictions. Westerners no longer went so freely to places like Chicken Street. The Swedish woman left town, and the website stagnated. The American Embassy closed its in-house gallery. The numbers of foreigners began to decline with the approach of the deadline for a NATO withdrawal in 2014. The art business, which depended so heavily on the foreign community, declined markedly. At the gallery, Mr. Khosravi tried to

persuade Mr. Hamdard to lower his prices because months were going by without a sale; he refused. He did not care, he says: "We have seen many bad days in this war, so it won't bother me if we don't sell."

For a while, he responded to the sagging market by cranking out the sort of clichéd Afghan painting that has long been a staple of the tourist trade here — the buzkashi matches, colourful marketplaces sans squalor; endless painted knockoffs of the Steve McCurry photograph of the green-eyed Afghan refugee girl. One day two years ago, Mr. Hamdard just put aside his paints and stopped entirely. For all his relative success, he says, he felt like a failure in his own country. Since he had sold mostly to foreigners passing through, he was little known and recognized in his own country, said Mr. Khosravi, who keeps his Bamiyan Gallery open only by subsidizing it with a travel agency business. "His work has gone to the four winds, that's the problem," he said. "In Afghanistan, people don't care about art."

Mr. Hamdard's brothers pleaded with him to go back to it, but he took a job at Kabul University, teaching drawing to undergraduates. It pays \$140 a month.

"That's the problem with my brothers: I know why they encourage me to paint — they want the money," he says. "I want them to admire my art. If they ever once talked to me about art the way you have, I might change my mind."

Abdul Wasi Hamdard is no longer a young artist. He does not want his precise age published, but says he is older than he looks. Perhaps not. About his decision not to paint, he answers like this: "Say you have a soldier, and you ask him, 'Do you know how to fight?' And he says yes. Then you ask, 'So do you mind it when you don't?' "

Martial Arts Women Fight for Rohullah Nikpai Cup

As many as 37 women participated in the full contact Shin Gi Tai martial arts tournament in Kabul on Friday, fighting for the cup named after Afghanistan's martial arts Olympian Rohullah Nikpai.

Monisa Rustam Zada beat her opponents, all aged between 17 and 23, to take home the cup dubbed "Ambassador of Peace Rohullah Nikpai".

Nikpai is the Afghan taekwondo champion who has won two Olympic bronze medals — one in Beijing in 2008 and one in London in 2012 — the only two Olympic medals ever won by Afghanistan.

Six clubs participated in Friday's tournament organised by the Shin Gi Tai Federation which was founded in 2004.

Prominent lawmakers and other athletes were among the spectators who attended the matches. "The encouragement from the government and Afghan figures can make these athletes better in the future," Afghan MP Haji Mohammad Mahqiq said.

Afghan ambassador to Pakistan Omar Daoudzai said: "The government should provide more

funding towards our youth sports to ensure they have standard facilities."

'Afghan Star' Season 8

One of Afghanistan's leading entertainment shows began its eighth season on Friday November 2, a testament to its success and popularity. Modelled on the show 'American Idol', 'Afghan Star' was launched to discover hidden singing talent around Afghanistan and build the fledging music scene.

The show's appeal to a population which is largely young and poor is its potential fasttrack to fame. It has also pushed boundaries for women in the music industry.

The show's female contestants gained strong public support and a following.

Along with the domestic audience, the online portal is increasing its popularity abroad. The introduction of 3G internet services in Afghanistan has boosted not only the participation of Afghans in-country, but also Afghans and Farsi-speakers living abroad. For the eighth season, auditions will be based on larger zones in Afghanistan, whereas the previous versions selected contestants from the 34 provinces. Songs from Afghan Star singers have already topped charts in the country.

The show's regional competitors, in terms of the technical expertise and its presentation of the stage sets, filming, and audio, include India. Contestants come better prepared now, after witnessing in the previous years how serious it gets at the pointy end of the competition.

Donkeys replace helicopters in Afghanistan

Afghan troops, tasked with defending outposts without high-tech equipment such as helicopters and jets, are relying on donkeys, an ANA military official said.

Hundreds of donkeys are sustaining bases built and defended by U.S. troops and are in use as modern air power and transport equipment are being withdrawn.

"Donkeys are the Afghan helicopter," said Col. Abdul Nasseeri, an Afghan battalion commander in Konar province.

While U.S. military officials hope the use of donkeys is an "Afghan-sustainable" approach that can endure as Western support tapers off, Afghanistan's security leaders are unimpressed. After a decade of exposure to cutting-edge technology, they want their military to look like the U.S. army.

With U.S. helicopters on their way home, the donkey trade has risen steadily, transporting soldiers' needs from food to ammunition, and key fighting positions are being maintained by donkeys and their handlers.

One of the handlers, 16-year-old Qamuddin in Pech Valley, Afghanistan, said: "You are the richest and most powerful countries in the world. Of course you can afford helicopters. Without donkeys, there would be no Afghan army."

A Kickstarter campaign for an ancient site in Afghanistan

The crowd-funding platform Kickstarter has become a popular avenue for enterprising individuals to raise money for all kinds of creative enterprises. Now, one documentarian is using it to try to save an ancient city in Afghanistan.

Mes Aynak, a 2,600-year-old Buddhist site in Logar province, Afghanistan, is a 100-acre monastery complex filled with Buddhist temples, statues, relics and manuscripts. It's also home to one of the largest copper deposits in the world.

In 2007 a Chinese company paid \$3.5 billion to lease Mes Aynak for 30 years. The company plans to extract more than \$100 billion worth of copper from the area. It's one of the largest foreign investments in Afghanistan. The Afghan government stands to reap a potential \$1.2 billion a year in revenues from the mine.

In 2009, the Chinese company gave archaeologists three years to excavate and move the artifacts before work starts on the copper mine. Archaeologists have been scrambling to save a major religious site.

In his Kickstarter profile, Brent Huffman, a documentary filmmaker and professor at Northwestern University, said he visited Mes Aynak in June 2011 "and immediately fell in love with this incredible site. I felt I needed to do everything in my power to save this cultural heritage for future generations of Afghans and for the international community."

If he meets his \$30,000 goal, Huffman plans to make a film detailing the imminent destruction of the ancient Buddhist city. "The Buddhas of Mes Aynak" "will follow several main characters to tell this dramatic and multi-layered story," and will include a "well-rounded cast of supporting characters including Buddhist scholars, Afghan politicians and citizens in support of Chinese investments, U.S. military strategists, and Chinese veteran businessmen living and working in Afghanistan."

Huffman writes that he hopes the film will raise awareness to both save Mes Aynak and "prevent similar destruction from happening to other cultural sites in Afghanistan located on or near mineral resources."

<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/472409280/the-buddhas-of-mes-aynak>

Literacy Lessons on Mobile Phones

Afghanistan has launched a new literacy programme that enables Afghan women to learn to read and write using a mobile phone.

The phone is called Ustad Mobile (Mobile Teacher) and provides national curriculum courses in both national languages, Dari and Pashto, as well as mathematics. All the lessons are audio-video, with writing, pronunciation and phrases installed in Ustad Mobile phones -- and they are distributed free to students.

Sitting on a carpet in a small Kabul classroom with a handful of women learning to read and write, 18-year-old Muzhgan Nazari said the Taliban, who banned schooling for girls during their rule, were in power when she should have started her education. Her father had also opposed his daughters attending school.

"Since I heard about this literacy training centre for women, I convinced my father and he allowed me to attend on a daily basis," she said.

The programme is being rolled out by a commercial provider and the ministry of education, with financial backing from the United States.

The Mobile Teacher software was developed by Paiwastoon, an Afghan IT company, with \$80,000 dollars in US aid. Despite millions of girls now attending school, Afghanistan's literacy rate among women remains at just 12.5 percent, compared to 39.3 percent for Afghan men, according to UN figures.

The company has experience in the field, having previously managed the "One Laptop Per Child" programme that handed out 3,000 computers to women and children in Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Baghlan and Jalalabad. They say that mobiles are cheaper than any computer, and people are familiar with them. Maintenance is much easier.

The free app can be installed on all mobile phones with a memory card slot and a camera. Individual lessons, to be made available on the ministry of education website, will teach new words and phrases.

The company plans to add more subjects like English, Arabic, Pashtu, health, agriculture. Phone shop owners say they are willing to install it as they install other software on mobiles.

At the moment, some 100 students are using the Mobile Teacher in a pilot project in Kabul, 65 percent of them women. "Our focus and target is mostly on uneducated women," said director of programmes at the ministry, Allah Baz Jam.

Violence against Women Law is Not Islamic: Hajj Deputy Minister

Some parts of Afghanistan's Elimination of Violence Against Women law is not in accordance with the provisions of Islamic Sharia law and will not be enforced by mullahs, Deputy Minister of Hajj Daee-ul-Haq Abed said.

"This act is against Islamic provisions so it would be difficult for our mullahs to implement it," Abed said in response to an activist asking if the Hajj Ministry will promote the law through the Islamic leaders.

"As long as it is not revised, we will not enforce it," Abed added, saying amendments were needed for it to be in accordance with Sharia law. He was speaking in a meeting with Afghan lawmakers and the civil society members. He did not elaborate on what parts of the law go against Islam.

"This law is not against the Islamic provisions, and the Ministry of Hajj is obliged to enforce the law otherwise it will face legal actions from the MPs," said Badakhshan MP Nilofar Ibrahimi, who attended the meeting with the Hajj officials.

Some other MPs including Massouda Karokhil, said that the mullahs are effectively encouraging men to commit violence against women.

"These mullahs are the cause of the increasing violence against women, with some of them even encouraging men to do violence against their wives," Karokhil said.

The Elimination of Violence Against Women law was enacted in 2009 to criminalise child marriage, forced marriage, selling and buying women for the purpose or under the pretext of marriage, baad (giving away a woman or girl to settle a dispute), forced self-immolation, rape, beating and 15 other acts of violence against women.

Its enforcement has been regarded as weak, at best. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission said recently that reported cases of violence against women have increased this year.

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