

Afghan News Roundup of stories you might have missed in April 2014. Soft power may harden, foreign hangouts closed, Bagram opens its gates, inflation up, MH 370 down in Kandahar ? Compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Services.

Soft power: Is it enough ? Indian options

In Afghanistan today, India's strategic interest means preventing an extremist takeover of the country that could spread havoc across the border. Afghanistan is a potential "land bridge," giving India access to economic opportunity in Central Asia. To achieve the stability and security this requires, India needs to increase its assistance to Afghanistan, and engage with security affairs and with local leaders and traditional institutions.

India's pledge of \$2 billion in aid makes it Afghanistan's fifth largest bilateral donor (behind the US, the UK, Japan, and Germany). In 2011, India and Afghanistan signed the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP), an institutional framework for extensive bilateral cooperation beyond 2014.

India has pursued its longterm goals through developmental assistance, reconstruction initiatives, political and administrative capacity building, and reestablishing cultural and historical links. It has not developed any military role, in deference to Pakistani sensitivities and to stay out of volatile Afghanistan's internal conflicts. Unusually, most of its aid goes through the Afghan government, favouring central government in Kabul. India has built power lines to central Asia, a road to Iran to break dependence on Pakistani ports, and a new parliament building.

India's centralised approach ignores the traditional and powerful ethno-tribal dynamics of the Afghan society ( although Indian intelligence services are said to have been building up networks of contacts in strategic areas such as the south and south-west).

Afghan powerbrokers are unimpressed by India's avoidance of Afghanistan's security affairs, construing that she has allowed herself to be hostage to Pakistan's sensibilities.

The co-operation agreement signed between India and Afghanistan in 2011 contains provisions for assistance and training for Afghan forces; but they may not suffice. Post withdrawal, if Afghan National Security forces cannot cope with a widespread and powerful insurgency, New Delhi may have to reconsider.

India's success in Afghanistan depends on her ability to innovate, expand and deepen its engagement on many fronts. Current thinking is geared towards best-case scenario. If the going gets tougher, she will have to rethink.

The Protective Lockup

The Afghan government responded to pre-election attacks aimed at foreigners in Kabul by closing the venues they frequent.

Kabul police authorities ordered at least 11 restaurants and several guesthouses closed until after the presidential election.

The Gandamak Lodge, a guesthouse and restaurant popular with journalists, was among those closed. "The Afghan government is not capable of providing security to expats," said Peter Jouvenal, the Gandamak's British founder and owner. "They had no concern as to where our guests would go ♦ they insisted we throw them out on the streets. They were not interested in the safety of our foreign guests."

Renee Montagne of NPR has always stayed at the Gandamak when here. "I just said, 'Well, welcome to Afghanistan,' " she said. Another expat, who wished to remain anonymous, said, "They just don't want another dead foreigner."

Some journalists evicted from the Gandamak moved to the Serena Hotel, which Western security advisers had previously viewed as safe. "I just find it ironic," said Ms. Montagne, who noted that the Gandamak had never been attacked, unlike the Serena.

Other restaurants claimed they were told by the intelligence agency or the Afghan police that their security was deemed inadequate. Some were informed of a possible attack on foreign guesthouses in the offing.

Afghan officials seemed sensitive to suggestions they had been unable to protect these establishments. President Karzai's spokesman, Fayeque Wahedi, wouldn't confirm

whether the president had ordered the measures. Sediq Seddiqi, spokesman for the Interior Ministry, denied there had been any such closings. The authorities had offered advice to restaurants and guesthouses on improving their security, he said. An intelligence agency official, speaking anonymously, confirmed that an unspecified number of guesthouses had been ordered closed.

4159 released from Bagram

The government of Afghanistan has released 4159 prisoners from the Bagram prison after their cases were reviewed by review panel. The panel presented their report to a meeting which was chaired by President Hamid Karzai.

Around 5021 prisoners detained by US forces transferred to Afghan control over the past three years.

Gen. Farooq, head of Bagram prison and commander of the military police, said they have not received the files regarding 336 prisoners from the US side. The Afghan national security advisor was instructed to require US forces in to transfer immediately the remaining files to the Afghan attorney general's office.

Bagram prison was handed over to the Afghan government in 2013, following the Afghan government's "private assurances" that detainees whom the United States considered to be most dangerous would not be released.

Economic growth down sharply

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) reports a steep reduction in Afghanistan's economic development, from 11.9% in 2012 to 3.3% in 2013.

ADB Country Director Mr. Tokeshi said investment in the private sector has reduced from 4.9% to 3.6%. Food prices have gone up by 9.7%. Inflation rate of non-food items has decreased 4.8%, but the overall inflation has increased from 6.2% in 2012 to 7.4% in 2013.

The ADB claims to have invested \$3.8 billion in Afghanistan since 2002, including \$585.1 million last year. ADB officials vowed to step up efforts to resolve the issue of reduced economic development in Afghanistan in the next two years, pledged \$1.2 billion in aid to Afghanistan for the years till 2016.

Missing Flight MH 370 'Hijacked' by Terrorists to Kandahar Province

A Russian newspaper, Moskovsky Komsomolets, claims that missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH 370 is located in Kandahar Province, and the plane was hijacked and taken to Afghanistan, with the passengers now being held captive.

"Flight MH370 Malaysia Airlines missing on March 8 with 239 passengers was hijacked....Pilots are not guilty; the plane was hijacked by unknown terrorists. We know that the name of the terrorist who gave instructions to pilots is 'Hitch.' The plane is in Afghanistan not far from Kandahar near the border with Pakistan."

The Russian news report also said the terrorists are bargaining with Chinese and Malaysian officials, which also wasn't confirmed by either country.

The Moskovsky Komsomolets report didn't elaborate on its sources. The alleged hijacking has not been confirmed by Malaysia.

More than a month ago The Independent newspaper reported that officials were exploring the possibility the plane may have been hijacked to Pakistan or Afghanistan:

"The missing Malaysian airlines flight MH370 may have been deliberately flown under the radar to Taliban-controlled bases on the border of Afghanistan, it has emerged, as authorities said that the final message sent from the cockpit came after one of the jet's communications systems had already been switched off."

The Pakistani Taliban has previously denied hijacking the plane.

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