

In this edition : Taliban office in Qatar, Nip/Tuck by Najibullah, , Afghan Carpets nominated for an award in Germany, Out of the caves : A thousand year old Jewish treasure leaves Afghanistan, Investment up, SMEs down, Red carpet for Buzkashi boys in Hollywood. Compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Services

Taliban office in Qatar

Negotiations are underway to establish the conditions for the Taliban's proposed office in Qatar.

Foreign minister Zalmay Rassoul said, "[The office] will not be opened if the Taliban group or its representatives do not announce the start of talks with the Afghan government. It will be highly risky if the office is opened and secret talks are held."

Addressing Afghani parliamentarians, he added, "The office will not represent the Taliban group. The office will be used only for talks between Afghan government and Taliban representatives. Afghan government will have the right to close the office at any time if any violations take place."

Previously, the Afghan government insisted that the Taliban office be located in Saudi Arabia or Turkey. The switch to Qatar followed direct talks between the Taliban and Washington.

Nip/Tuck by Najibullah

Najibullah Najib honed his plastic surgery skills treating victims of war, poverty and domestic violence.

He has treated children born with clubfeet and cleft palates, and survivors of gas-lamp fires and gunshot wounds. Young women who wish to escape from forced marriages often set themselves alight; those who survive require extensive skin grafts. More recently, Najib's patients are middle-class women who, having escaped domestic captivity and been exposed to international media, Bollywood and, for the affluent few, travel, are turning up to ask for cosmetic surgery.

Some are able to pay for this out of the wages they can now earn, bypassing the need to depend on their fathers, husbands and guardians, or even to inform them beforehand. Surgery is usually performed under local anaesthetic, and the patients are sent home the same day.

Nose jobs, for between \$300 and \$600, are particularly popular, as are eyelid lifts. Ethnic Hazaras, a minority much persecuted by the Sunni majority and most savagely by the Taliban, with distinctive, epicanthic folds on their eyelids and flat noses, are prominent among the doctor's patients.

The surgery is controversial, raising questions about vanity and the acceptance of Allah's will; but a woman's fate here is largely decided by her marriageability, and a pretty daughter is easier to marry off than a plain or damaged one.

Afghan Carpets nominated for awards

Afghan carpets, traditionally a major source of employment in Afghanistan, have been selected for an international trade fair award in Germany.

Two carpets, one woven in Bamiyan and one in Kabul, Kabul, have been selected for the international Carpet Design Awards at the DOMOTEX Flooring Trade Fair 2013 in Hanover. In 2008, a Bamiyan carpet won first prize.

In the UK, Afghan carpets, usually featuring simple black guls on a red or golden ground, are a mainstay of the accessible Oriental rug market.

A union official commented, " This carpet of ours is designed from a Mamluk Sultan carpet woven in Egypt in the 16th century. We are sure that this year again Afghan carpets will win first

place.”

Out of the Caves, A Thousand Year Old Treasure

Ancient Hebrew manuscripts in Hebrew characters from Afghanistan caves have been acquired by Israel's National Library. The documents include biblical commentaries, letters and financial records.

This "Afghan Genizah" is the most significant of its kind since the "Cairo Genizah" was discovered in an Egyptian synagogue more than 100 years ago.

Genizah, or "storage," is a place adjacent to a synagogue or Jewish cemetery where Hebrew-language books and papers are stored. Under Jewish law, it is forbidden to throw away writings containing the formal names of God.

The manuscripts, preserved since the 11th century by the dry, shady conditions of the caves, include writings in Hebrew, Aramaic, Judea-Arabic and the unique Judeo-Persian language, the Yiddish of the period. They record the commerce of the Silk Road and the culture of the Jewish settlement on the far fringes of the Persian Empire. They are thought to have come from caves in the northeast region of modern-day Afghanistan, which served as hideouts for the Taliban.

The details of the acquisition, and the recent history of the manuscripts, remain mysterious. The library was contacted by various dealers and purchased 29 out of hundreds of the documents after long negotiations. The library was unwilling to state how much it paid, as it it hopes to purchase more and doesn't want to drive up prices.

Investments Up, SMEs down

The Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (AISA) announced that investments by domestic and foreign companies increased by 26 percent in 2012, from \$463 to \$585, with aviation, industrial, agricultural and real estate sectors showing the greatest growth.

Some of these companies switched from Isaf-funded projects to investing in longer term projects, especially in industry, agriculture and mining.

Many small and medium businesses ceased trading. The Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industries said SMEs were down by 20% last year.

Red Carpet for Buzkashi Boys

A film produced with a joint international and Afghan crew won best drama at the LA Shorts Fest. It's now eligible for an Academy Award nomination.

American film maker Sam French directed the film, set in contemporary Afghanistan. Ariel Nasr, the producer, is half- American, half-Afghan. His credits include documentaries Good Morning Kandahar (2008) and Boxing Girls of Kabul (2012).

The production aimed to tell Afghan stories and build the capacity of the country's devastated film industry. The film employed local actors and Afghan film interns alongside an international crew.

Buzkashi Boys has won awards at festivals in the U.S. and Europe. It will be shown at the Santa Barbara Film Festival, and Cinequest, in San Jose, California.

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