

Afghan News Roundup for March 2014 is compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

On the playing fields of Khorasan FIFA and the International Football Association Board have lifted a ban on female players wearing head coverings.

Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim al-Khalifa, president of the Asian Football Confederation, praised the decision. Officials in Afghanistan and Pakistan assume that the ending of the ban will result in more orthodox Muslim women competing in sports.

Head scarves were banned because of fears that players who wore them risked injury to their head or neck. New designs with safety features began testing in 2012.

End of Supply Convoy Guards

The Afghan Ministry of Interior announced its intention to disband the Afghan Public Protection Force, which protects military supply convoys, international aid programs and foreign installations.

APPF is a government enterprise paid for commercially by the clients. A 17,000-strong force is supposed to guard the gates of military bases and foreign installations, and provide armed escorts for fuel convoys. In 2010, the APPF replaced an assortment of private security contractors, difficult to manage cohesively and unpopular in country. APPF will now be absorbed into the Ministry.

Coalition officials say it is unclear how, exactly, the Afghan government plans to implement the change, and who will assume responsibility for protecting reconstruction projects. A 2012 audit by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction found that the shift "increased the uncertainty over security" for U.S.-funded projects and increased the cost of guarding them. Clients complained of poor management by the Afghan government company. Some say they are paying their guards directly, because they haven't receiving their salaries from the APPF.

A spokesman for the Ministry said the Afghan National Police would take over some of the functions of the guard force. Salaries will be met by the Afghan government. Discussions would commence with international partners to ensure a workable resolution.

Retracing the Silk Road

According to the Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan, Deng Xijun, the revival of the historic Silk Road is essential for greater connectivity between China and her neighbours.

In the article for the English newspaper Daily Outlook Afghanistan, Deng cited the call of Chinese President Xi Jinping for the joint development of an economic belt along the Silk Road. "The initiative, by linking Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia, will contribute to greater connectivity and complementarity across the sub-regions, bringing Pan-Asian and Euroasian regional cooperation to a new level," Deng said.

"The Belt initiative comes as a highlight in China's diplomacy in the new era, especially its neighbourhood diplomacy occupies the primary position in China's overall diplomacy."

Australian Coach for Kabul Cricket

The Afghanistan Cricket Board announced the appointment of former Papua New Guinea National Coach, Peter Anderson, as the new Afghanistan National Cricket Academy Coach. He will take up his role in April, based at the Academy in the Kabul Cricket Stadium.

Anderson has been accredited as a Cricket Australia High Performance coach since 1987, and Papua New Guinea National Coach for the past 2 years. He says one of the highlights of his role as PNG coach, was the achievement of IDO status and ICC High Performance funding.

In his new role he will concentrate on setting up a structure, with the Academy part of the cricket pathway in Afghanistan, from school cricket, U-19, "A" Team all the way to the National Team. The Australian system which he came through as player and later as a coach has been adopted by many countries as a blue print. Anderson says he understands the challenges that countries like Afghanistan and PNG have in striving for international recognition.

Having followed Afghanistan's cricket team's progress from afar, Anderson is convinced that Afghanistan has some of the most talented,

naturally gifted players in the world

Key to his success will be his immersion in the local culture. Challenges can be simple things like players just getting to training sessions. In the Associate countries, he says, there is a lot of natural talent and it's important you don't over coach, keep it simple. But, if you can bring structure and pathways to guide that natural talent, you will achieve more consistent performance. Playing good consistent cricket, therein lies the biggest challenge for Associate countries.

Small businesses stagnating

The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce & Industries says that the government should provide loans and micro credit system to small craft workers, to drive national economic development.

"From a carpenter to a coppersmith, the government doesn't have a policy for them... the world is moving from a craft system to a mechanical system," said ACCI deputy chief, Khan Jan Alkozai. He says Afghanistan must learn from the experience of other countries, where small businesses are supported to contribute to national prosperity.

Central Statistics Organisation Deputy Director Hasibullah Mouwahed said: "Today craft industries have changed into mechanical industries. Most of the countries are using mechanical industries. If we concentrate on home-based craft industries we cannot change our gross domestic product and trade balance."

Question Mark over Campaign Expenditure

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) published the financial statements submitted by presidential candidates, detailing campaign expenditures. IEC officials indicated there were doubts over the veracity of the figures.

IEC Spokesman Noor Mohammad Noor hoped the information submitted would be widely scrutinised.

"The report has been submitted by the financial representatives of the candidates to the IEC, and we published it on the website without any changes to help civil society institutions and people express their views on it," Noor said. "If anyone has evidence that shows candidates spent more money send it to Election Commission so that we can refer the case to the Electoral Complaints Commission."

Doubts about the accuracy of the expenditure report are so far unsubstantiated. IEC suspicion is largely based on the expectation that more money would have been spent as indicated by the level of campaign activity. It is also an acknowledgement that false accounting, under the current system, is all too easy to sustain. Noor stressed ed that if evidence indicating fraud came to light, legal action would be taken..

A summary of the statistics published:

Abdullah Abdullah received some 4,545,000 AFG in financial support

Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai received 2,340,000 AFG

Zalmi Rassoul received 3,100,000 AFG.

Qayoum Karzai, who withdraw from the race last week, reportedly received 1,105,000 AFG in financial assistance, but spent 6,364,000 AFG from his own budget.

Mohammad Nadir Naeem received 235,000 AFG and spent 4,183,000 AFG.

Hedayat Aming Arsala received 1,091,000 AFG and spent 3,568,647 AFG from his own budget.

Qutbuddin Hilal did not receive financial cooperation and spent 5,179,000 AFG from his own money.

Gul Agha Sherzai also did not receive financial assistance and spent 3,728,000 AFG.

Abul Rab Rasoul Sayaf received no financial assistance and spent 4,225,000 AFG.

Abdul Rahim Wardak spent 399,000 AFG

Daoud Sultanzoy 147,000 AFG.

Election law decrees that a candidate is allowed to spend no more than 10,000,000 AFG during the two month campaign period.

Kabul to London by bike: heat up some beans and keep going

Former Royal Marine Chris Short will attempt to ride his motorbike from Kabul to London to raise for the UK-based charity Mission Motorsport. which aims to aid in the recovery and rehabilitation of those affected by military operations by providing opportunities through motor sport.

Chris Short served in Afghanistan but left the British armed forces after being injured.

He said, "I served for

eight years. I was injured and medically discharged. I've been in Afghanistan for two years and I decided some time ago, probably about a year and a half ago, that it would be terribly exciting to buy a motorcycle here and ride it back."

Chris decided he make the trip in aid of Mission Motorsport, who do unique work with sick or injured former soldiers, putting them into an environment that recreates the teamwork, camaraderie and excitement they thrive on, whilst undergoing medical and other types of treatment."

He said, "So we're going to head up through Afghanistan, which I guess is the hairy part, then a few of the other 'stans' and I guess we'll just pull off to the side of the road every night, pitch a tent, heat up some beans and keep going."

He also added, "Not everybody out here is the enemy. Actually the reality is that 99.9 per cent of the people here are desperate to get along, they're very, very friendly, they're kind, they are normal people and I like getting out and seeing that."

The Russians are Coming (back)

Moscow is rebuilding the relics of the Soviet occupation and promoting its own political and cultural agenda. Russian officials point to their development activities as a counterexample to U.S. aid projects, seen by many Afghans as wasteful and misguided.

The Russian government has compiled a list of 140 Soviet-era projects for rehabilitation, according to the embassy. The Kabul Housebuilding Factory, the country's largest manufacturing facility, received \$25 million in new equipment last year. \$20 million is earmarked to renovate the Soviet House of Science and Culture, constructed in 1982. The building fell into ruin in the civil war and became a notorious shooting gallery for Afghan addicts.. It will reopen later this year as the Russian Cultural Centre, holding a vast library of Russian literature and offering language courses. The number of students studying Russian at Kabul University has doubled in the past two years, as has the number of scholarships Russia is offering to Afghan students.

Russian officials say that supporting Afghanistan makes sense, given their regional interests. Afghanistan shares borders with three former Soviet states that still receive considerable funding and direction from Moscow. And Afghanistan continues to be a major source of narcotics that pour into Russia. Economic development, along with a Russian-funded counternarcotics program, could curb that illicit trade, officials hope.

"The mistake of the last 12 years is that people were eager to give money, but without the proper strategy," said Russian Ambassador Andrey Avetisyan, who was based in Kabul as a young diplomat in the 1980s.

"The Soviet money went to the right place. They were efficient in spending their money and doing it through the Afghan government," President Karzai said in an interview with The Washington Post this month.

The new warmth between the Kremlin and Afghanistan was visible this week when the Afghan government released a message from Putin marking the Persian new year. "I am certain that friendly ties and cooperation between Russia and Afghanistan in the future will add to the goodness and welfare of our people," Putin said in the message to Karzai.

"What the Soviets did here was really fundamental. They were thinking about the long term," said Ahmad, the head engineer of the reinvigorated house-building factory.

Stepan Anikeev, the spokesman for the Russian Embassy in Kabul: "We want to enlarge our role in the region. It's not only for Afghanistan, but for our own goals."

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