Afghan News RoundUp April 2013 - part two

Afghan Artists

Since 2001, Afghan artists have worked in relative freedom. Will it endure ?

The Taliban banned music. Public concerts are now common, though not universally. In March, in Ghazni province, a show was banned after local officials reportedly described music as "forbidden."

The tv show 'Afghan Star' commands good viewing figures, but threats are directed at those who appear on it. Mohammad Qasem Ramishgar, a judge, receives intimidating messages by phone and internet. He says mainstream 'fundamentalism' is the problem, not particular insurgent groups. "In our nation we easily accept the word of a mullah compared to another man."

During the communist period, art was permissible if it conformed to the socialist ideal. Abdul Wasi Rahraw Omarzad, director of the Centre for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan, said "When the Russians came they stopped the movement and said 'make posters and social realism' . From that time we lost freedom of expression or [the right] to be an individual artist."

Conservative Islam is a challenge to the arts in Afghanistan today. In June 2012, Ghazala Javed, a hugely popular Pashtun singer, was shot dead in the Pakistani border city of Peshawar alongside her father. Pashtun singer, Yasmin Gul, died in mysterious circumstances in Quetta, Pakistan, in 2010. Ayman Udas, was killed in Peshawar in 2009 — allegedly by her brothers. In art, as elsewhere, the family is often the first to police the unruly behaviour of its sisters and daughters.

China: Behind the Burqa

The trade in Afghan burqas is under siege from east and west. Cheap imports from China undercut domestic production, while under Western influence many urban women discard the costume in favour of a simple head covering.

In Kabul, women workers began adopting Western dress after the 2001. Demand for burqas is strongest in the provinces. A longterm Kabul trader sold at least 50 burqas a day when the Taliban were in power. Now he sells 20 a day, mostly to provincial women.

Afghan-made burqas cost from 1,000 to 3,000 Afghanis (about $20-$60), and Chinese-made robes for perhaps 500-800 Afghanis ($10-$15).

In the countryside, where kidnapping and rape are a constant threat, a burqa bestows safe anonymity.

Women's rights activists say the decline of the burqa should not be taken as an end to the problems endemic among Afghan women. It's a potent symbol, but the realities of domestic violence and forced marriages continue.

"The current progress and the current achievements for Afghan women are very cosmetic and anything gained can be lost easily," said Selay Ghaffar, executive director of the NGO Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan.

The traditional burqa is sewn from cloth produced in Afghanistan, embroidered, and the cap made, by hand. Light blue is worn in the Kabul area, white up north in Mazar-i-Sharif, and brown and green in southern Kandahar.

Haj Hussain, a 75-year-old dyer, says he dyed 80 burqas a day during Taliban rule and now is down to 30. There are no official statistics for burqa sales. Some Afghan manufacturers are buying material from China or Pakistan, which is easier to pleat.
"The Chinese have taken the market and there's much less business for handmade burqas.

That means less work for many poor women," said Adila Sultani, a tailor in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Women in Motion

Dressed in long pants and full sleeves, with headscarves beneath their helmets, the Afghan women's cycling team practice on the highways before dawn on dated road bikes, accompanied by the coach of the men's cycling team.

For Afghan women, riding a bicycle is taboo, "generally considered immoral," according to Heather Barr, an Afghanistan researcher for Human Rights Watch.

Galpin, who claims to be the first woman to have ridden a mountain bike through the Afghan countryside, founded the nonprofit organization Mountain2Mountain in 2006, which has built a heroin rehabilitation centre for women and computer labs for girls' schools in Kabul, among other projects. Galpin plans to return to Afghanistan to distribute a load of cycling gear to the men and women's national cycling teams; bicycle tools, seats, shoes and jerseys.

She will be accompanied by five other women: a photographer, a writer, a social media manager and two filmmakers, who plan to make a short film about the women's team titled "Afghan Cycles."

Despite having received death threats, many of the female cyclists are eager to speak publicly about the team, Galpin said. "They're no different than women in Afghanistan who risk their lives to attend school or run for Parliament. They know the only way to challenge and break the taboo is for other women to see them riding bikes."

Afghanistan has 45 licensed female cyclists among three categories: junior, under-23 and elite, according to the International Cycling Union, the world governing body of cycling, or U.C.I. Some of these riders participated in the Asian cycling championships, held in New Delhi last month. Salma Kakar, 16, a cyclist on the Afghan women's team, recently announced her intent to represent Afghanistan at the Olympics.

New Zealand, New Life

Ninety-four Afghans, including 20 children, were welcomed to a new life at the Whenuapai air base by the Chief of the Defence Force, Immigration Minister and Police Commissioner of New Zealand.

The Afghans, interpreters and their families, were employed by the New Zealand Defence Force in Afghanistan, most with the PRT in Bamyan province. The New Zealand government agreed in 2012 to accept them under its refugee quota.

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key sent best wishes for the Afghans. Key said the interpreters played a vital role in the operation of the PRT, and he is grateful for their service.

Afghan Diplomats Seek Asylum

Some Afghan diplomats, including ambassadors, have sought asylum in their host countries, according to one political analyst.

The Afghan foreign ministry said that the numbers involved was very small, that it has devised a new regulation for employing diplomats, and that in the future such issues will be resolved with the country the diplomat is sent to.

"Over the recent years, diplomats were not employed at the foreign ministry based on their competencies and capacities but through in-betweens; Jihadi leaders, MPs, and figures in power," said Ahmad Saeedi, a political analyst. "Based on the figures I have, Afghanistan has 63 offices of diplomatic mission and more than 70 percent of the diplomats who were changed in Afghanistan over the course of one to one and a half year have not returned to Afghanistan."

"Unfortunately, there are a few cases in Canada and Germany. In a very few cases, there were those who sought asylum. We informed Canada and Germany about the issue," said Jawid Lodin, deputy foreign minister for political affairs. "The only measure we can put into practice is to agree with the host countries that, no matter what their laws are, our laws require that government staff cannot – with the privileges they receive – do such acts, which are not good for the country's reputation."

Bagram Batman

"Bagram Batman" is the star of a recent series of public-service announcements broadcast to troops deployed in and around Afghanistan. The camouflaged superhero—and his catchphrase, "SWEAR TO ME!"— have won a cult following among US soldiers.

While his rubber Batman mask, black cape and reflective belt over combat fatigues, Bagram Batman reminds the troops about the do's and don'ts of life on a forward operating base like Bagram, a small American town planted in the middle of a war zone.

Don't forget your weapon; don't wear headphones while jogging; and don't shoplift at the base exchange. Bagram Batman also enforces the most important rule of all: Don't forget your reflective belt, lest you be hit by the hulking Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles that roar in darkness through the base's main drag.

Built by the Soviets and rebuilt by the U.S. military, Bagram resembles a highly fortified strip mall. It is also a hat-and-salute zone. Bagram Batman is saluted as he walks past, on the lookout for violations. He gives his rank at "O-6 and half," a fictional rank between full colonel (O-6) and brigadier general.

One of the military's biggest obsessions is the dreaded reflective belt. For many it's the symbol of the military's overzealous enforcement of safety rules. A missing glow-belt is the surest way to invite a reprimand from a command sergeant major.

"Heck, wear two or three!" Bagram Batman suggests on his Facebook FB +0.50% page. "It's

like a CSM forcefield!"

After the U.S. Army posted a link to the weapons-carrying video—featuring Bagram Batman yelling "WHERE'S YOUR WEAPON?" at a clueless soldier—on an official Twitter account, @USArmy, Bagram Batman went viral. His profile has a thumbnail portrait of Bagram Batman knocking out a rule-breaking trooper with a "POW!"

Bagram Batman debuted in early March with a 30-second TV ad on smoking safety. In the American Forces Network spot, the caped crusader catches a soldier sneaking a cigarette near a fuel tank and wrestles the offender to the ground.

"I swear, Batman, I'll never do it again!" the soldier protests. "SWEAR TO ME!" barks Bagram Batman.

DC Entertainment, the Warner Bros. Entertainment company that owns the Batman character, had no official statement regarding the videos.

Another film features a soldier cranking up Taylor Swift tunes on his headphones before going out for a run. He fails to hear the message over the base p.a., warning of incoming fire. Batman pounces. "Never wear your headphones while you're running!" he exhorts. "I'm sorry Batman, I swear I'll never do it again!" Bagram Batman: "SWEAR TO ME!"

Last Minute Flights

Logistics teams had already dismantled nearly one-tenth of Forward Operating Base Sharana, the main US and Nato headquarters and only runway in eastern Paktika province, when the alarm was raised in Kabul. Work was in line with a US policy that unwanted bases must be levelled.

Nato estimates it would cost $250m (£160m) a year just to operate and maintain them all,

according to Ashraf Ghani, former finance minister and now head of the national commission on "transition".

"The issue from the [Nato coalition] side is the number of soldiers needed to protect these bases," Ghani said. Sharana's perimeter is almost 20km long. It is large enough to take all military and most civilian planes likely to fly just a few dozen kilometres from Waziristan region. He reckons a more rational use of Afghanistan's tens of thousands of soldiers will enable to maintain more of Nato's bases.

"The ministry of defence was just able to release 7,000 people by reallocating functions. If you look at the 170,000 soldiers and officers, at least half of them are in support duty, and this means considerable rationalisation needs to take place," Ghani said

US officers who planned the withdrawal from Paktika had originally decided to totally abandon Sharana, which plays a key role in opening up the isolated and restive border region to Kabul and its armed forces.

TAGS: Afghanistan, ISAF, Kabul, Bagram, Batman, military broadcasting, reflective belt, cycling, Mountain2Mountain, Olympics, diplomatic asylum, burqa, Forward Operating Base Sharana, airfields, Paktika, Waziristan,

with thanks to Global Post, Associated Press, The New York Times, Xinhua, Tolo News, The Wall Street Journal and The Guardian