

Latest Afghan News Round Up compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

The hand that feeds, energy deals, the Wakkan Kyrgyz, an MP's downfall, Afghan women as poets and police

Revolt in Congress over Afghan exit taxes

US Congress threatened severe cuts in foreign aid if President Karzai's government institutes an exit tax on American military equipment, food supplies and other goods as the United States draws down over the next 18 months.

"I have seen some stupid things from that government," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., co-sponsor of the amendment. "...But this one just went beyond the pale."

Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. calling talk of an exit tax on U.S. property "ridiculous".

The amendment proposes withholding \$5 in foreign aid for every \$1 in fees imposed on the United States for repatriating any property.

A June 28 letter to lawmakers identified almost \$1 billion in business taxes and penalties imposed by the Afghan government on contractors supporting U.S. operations. The U.S. special investigator for Afghanistan warned of hundreds of millions of dollars in additional future costs.

Since 2002, Congress has spent more than \$90 billion on humanitarian and reconstruction programs in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan amendment was attached to the Senate's 2014 foreign operations bill, which will go to a full Senate vote in the coming weeks.

The bill slashes the State Department's diplomacy and aid budget by 5 percent from last year, but is far less severe than the 20 percent reduction approved by a House panel last week.

### Gas supply contract with Turkmenistan

The Foreign Affairs Ministry of Afghanistan announced a Contract on Sales and Purchase of Gas with Turkmenistan, under the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan and India (TAPI) gas pipeline project.

The meeting was hosted and chaired by Khojamukhamedov, Deputy Prime Minister of Turkmenistan. Ministers of petroleum and mines, ambassadors, officials and technical agencies of the member countries were present at the signing, which will run for thirty years.

The contract, between Afghan Gas and Turkmen Gas companies and the Ministries of Mines and Petroleum of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, is considered a vital step towards implementing the TAPI Project.

Afghanistan will purchase 500 million cubic meters of gas in the first ten years, 1 billion in the following decade, and 1.5 billion in the decade after. The gas imported from Turkmenistan will be for industrial and domestic use.

The four countries agreed to establish a joint consortium, in cooperation with the Asian Development Bank. TAPI Project is one of Afghanistan's major regional projects. The pipeline will be 1800 km and pass through the borders of Turkmenistan and India. In addition to buying gas, Afghanistan will also be a transit country for this project, which will earn about \$ 500 million annually for Afghanistan.

## The Afghans that time forgot

The Wakhan corridor is a narrow stretch of sparse grassland sandwiched between some of the highest mountains in Asia. The British and Russian empires created it as a buffer zone after fighting for influence in the mid-19th century. The Kyrgyz call it Bam-e Duniya, or "the roof of the world". The 1,100 ethnic Kyrgyz living here, wedged between Tajikistan, Pakistan and China, have been isolated from the decades of violence. They have also missed the foreign aid that has helped reconstruction.

The Wakhan is one of many places where loyalties remain local. Kabul is considered a foreign country. The central government is mostly viewed as an abstraction, or an irrelevance.

The few technological advances that trickled in recently have thrown the region's poverty into stark relief. There is a feeling that the world has left them behind.

One in two children here die before the age of five, the highest infant mortality rate in the world. Most of the population live half a day's travel from a classroom. Blizzards and chilling temperatures last through the summer, and the only source of heat is burning yak dung. Kabul is 250 miles away, but it takes about 10 days to get there.

Kyrgyz here are descendants of nomads who roamed Central Asia for centuries, with herds of sheep, goats and cows. When nations in the region formally closed those borders in the early 20th century, about 1,000 Kyrgyz found themselves accidental Afghan citizens.

In the 1980s, the Russians built a dirt road through part of the Wakhan. It stops about 100 miles from Little Pamir, the heart of the Kyrgyz community.

Generations of Kyrgyz have lobbied to extend the road, but with no political representation in Kabul the proposal has gained no traction. Many residents now accept that the vastly expensive project will not go ahead, and that clinics and schools will remain out of reach.

Exorbitantly expensive roads have been built all over Afghanistan during the past decade. Many have been sponsored by Western governments to improve security.

But in the Wakhan, there's never been an insurgency. The Soviets set up several bases, but there was no local opposition. The Taliban and the Northern Alliance never appeared. Hence, no security imperative to drive the needed roadbuilding.

The US military briefly considered cash handouts to the Kyrgyz in 2008, but the proposal came to nothing. Most Kyrgyz can't remember the last time an official, Western or Afghan, visited from Kabul. So now the Kyrgyz consider their options; should they stay or should they go ?

They might move to Kyrgyzstan, the Central Asian nation which has voiced support for their repatriation. Or find a village in Afghanistan with electricity and schools and cellphone coverage. Or try to find long-lost relatives in Turkey.

Successful emigres return to urge the remaining Kyrgyz in Afghanistan that it's time to leave. Rahman Kul, a former leader of Afghanistan's Kyrgyz minority, persuaded about 1,000 people to follow him to Turkey in the 1980s. Those Kyrgyz eventually found their way to the middle-class city of Van, where they remain today.

Some, especially the older people, are resistant to moving. They're accustomed to life here. And they live in what is probably the safest place in Afghanistan.

But it's now possible to imagine an Afghanistan without a Kyrgyz community. As news of a different world continues to filter through, it's the young men who will ultimately decide whether to uproot the Kyrgyz.

### From Parliament to Purgatory

Noorzia Atmar was one of the country's first female lawmakers, an impassioned advocate for the rights of Afghan women.

Today she's living in a home for battered women. She's become a symbol of the unraveling of that progress.

After losing her place in the national parliament, Atmar was forced to divorce her abusive husband. Spurned by her family, she sought refuge in a shelter in Kabul for abused women and girls.

Atmar says her husband had seemed open-minded about her political ambitions. They married in 2010, while Atmar was vying for reelection as MP from the eastern province of Nangarhar. Soon after failing to be re-elected, Atmar was confined to her home. On her rare public appearances, she was compelled to wear the burqa.

Six months ago, her husband stabbed and threatened to kill her. Atmar fled to her family home. But her parents ordered her to return to her husband. She filed for divorce, and took refuge in the women's shelter. Her family disowned her.

Atmar says she fears becoming the victim of an honour killing by her husband, or her own family. She does not know how long she will stay at the shelter. The country's women's shelters have been described by conservative lawmakers as "brothels."

In 2011, President Karzai attempted to bring the independent shelters under government control. A draft law that would have required women to obtain government approval and even virginity tests before they would be granted access to shelters was abandoned largely thanks to Western media attention.

Parliament is currently considering revisions to the criminal code prohibiting a criminal defendant's relatives from being questioned as witnesses for the prosecution; effectively silencing victims and their family members.

Parliament is also debating a revised electoral law dropping the now reserved 25 percent of the seats on provincial and district councils for women. If enforced this would essentially deprive women of posts in parliament and in government at the provincial and local levels, where

conservative and male-dominated elements tend to prevail. In May, a debate on legislation outlawing rape and forced marriages was halted and may be scrapped altogether.

Perhaps as a response, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has launched a programme to educate, train, and empower at least 75,000 women between the ages of 18 and 30, strengthening women's rights groups, increasing female participation in the economy, and raising the number of women in decision-making positions in government.

### Afghan women joining up

Women are showing increasing interest in joining the police force in western province of Herat, according to police training officials.

"Two years ago, only three women enrolled in the police training centre; but up to now, 300 women have finished training and joined the police force in Herat and several dozens are receiving training here at the moment," said Colonel Mohammad Ibrahim, commander of the centre. Col. Ibrahim said that the policewomen underwent a six-week training to learn use of equipment, weaponry and self-defence, as well as Afghan laws.

"The policewomen are given privileges, they are not on duty overnight, do not take part in police operations except inspection and detention of women suspects. Other privileges are that policewomen can select which section in the police force they want to serve in and, they are never deployed to police activities outside their duty stations," Ibrahim noted. Classes for female police are separate from male.

Policewoman in the predominantly traditional Afghan society face opposition and threats. Militants shot dead a policewoman traveling with her family in Mohmad Dara district, eastern Nangarhar province, on July 21.

Government forces officially took the lead in security operations from ISAF and NATO forces on June 18 this year. They will take full responsibilities by the end of 2014.

Poetry: secret networks of resistance

The Afghan Women's Writing Project collects oral stories from illiterate Afghan women and promotes political writing by women in digital, print, and radio forms.

"We recruit only through word-of-mouth and delete any content that might be used to identify our writers," says director Richelle McClain.

The AWWP was founded in 2009. Today, 160 Afghan women across five provinces are enrolled in AWWP's workshops. While security is a constant concern, dwindling financial support is one of their greatest challenges. "We just lost 75 percent of our funding because of the US withdrawal," says McClain.

Mirman Baheer is Afghanistan's largest literary society for women. In Kabul it boasts over 100 members - professors, parliamentarians, journalists, and scholars. Around 300 members live in the outlying provinces — Khost, Paktia, Maidan Wardak, Kunduz, Kandahar, Herat, and Farah — where the group functions in secret. Many who cannot safely travel to meet together listen to radio programs broadcast by Mirman Baheer and the Afghan Women's Writing Project.

Before the 2014 elections in Afghanistan, the AWWP plans to partner with IFES Afghanistan (International Foundation for Electoral Systems) to promote political writings by local women through digital, print, and radio networks. They will also broadcast interviews with female candidates, and programs about how election results will impact Afghan citizens.

For many rural women in Afghanistan, these secret networks and broadcasts are their only education. The U.N. calculates that only 12 percent of Afghan women are literate.

But thanks to volunteer translators and journalists contemporary Afghan women's poetry can now reach global audiences. For example, the June 2013 issue of Poetry magazine was

dedicated to landays – vitriolic, two-line verses traditionally recited by Afghan women at the river, the well, or private gatherings.

The tradition of landays provides some level of anonymity for women because they are collective. They are recited and shared rather than attributed to a single poet.

Landays derive their power from shrewd layers of tension between the poet's inner and outer world. They can explore rage, sarcasm, irony, loss, separation, and desire. Many of the poems are humorous, filled with bawdy sexual imagery.

Whatever the subject, a landay lilts from word to word in a short lullaby with scathing, layered meaning. These poems come from a long legacy of Afghan women's literature.

"The Afghan woman poet predates the American or European female poet," says Zohra Saed, an Afghan-American poet living in New York City. "When people are interested in Afghan women's poetry, it is presented as poetry by the same women the world has imagined rescuing over the past 20 years...There were also women poets who were not part of the war. Writers raised abroad, their aesthetics and poetic voice is very different."

Afghan literature is fragmented by linguistic, cultural, and geographic divides. Some live outside their fatherland and write in English. Many female writers in Afghanistan come from the urban elite, often educated in Western universities. Poems by women in rural Afghanistan are rarely published. Groups like the Afghan Women's Writing Project and the Poetry Foundation are working to bridge this divide.

with thanks to Khaama Press, The Independent, Radio Free Europe, Xinhua, Associated Press, Christian Science Monitor