

Afghan News Roundup Compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

Red Bull, Red Tape, Salang Redux, Girls on Film, Women in the Ring and in Special Forces - away from combat, change is in the Afghan air.

Red Bull

The US Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service anticipates a boom in foreign energy drink consumption in Afghanistan.

Tea is widely drunk, and coffee hardly at all; now a new craze has emerged for Red Bull-type caffeinated energy drinks. A trend that started among the young, affluent urban has spread fast, and these drinks are consumed in every situation and across classes. They are sold by street vendors, grocery stores and restaurants, and a large number of new brands are competing for customers.

The products are often of questionable provenance, and it's common to find degraded and date expired samples for sale. The market is not regulated, and there have been calls for bans on religious and on food safety grounds. It is also a drink of choice for militants who hope to gain an edge in combat.

Salang

The Salang Tunnel, located in Parwan province, is Afghanistan's main transit north. It passes through the Hindu Kush and under the Salang pass. During Soviet times, it was never closed, allowing vital supplies to be fed to the Soviet military. The only way successfully to shut it would have been a suicide truck bomb, and the concept of suicide bombing had no traction among the mujahideen, suicide being seen as a religious crime.

Now ISAF has provided a \$11m grant for improvements, and an Afghan company has won the tender. Plans include enhancements to the air-conditioning system, lights, structure, and asphalt. Work will be carried out by night, and the tunnel will remain open to daytime traffic for the projected three years' duration of the renovations.

Red [Corner] Tape

Visa restrictions are hindering the ability of three female Afghan boxers to train and work in London. Despite their invited status, the athletes are stuck in Delhi, as Afghans travelling to UK must have their paperwork processed in India before entry is authorised.

The boxers are due to train and to raise money in London for their gym in Kabul, and then to be coached in Bristol by Britain's first officially licensed female boxer, Jane Couch MBE.

In 1998, Couch persuaded an industrial tribunal to overturn a British Boxing Board of Control ruling that had denied her a licence. The BBBC had argued that premenstrual syndrome made women too unstable to box.

Margaret Pope, founder of the Women in Sport Foundation, commented: "One of the justifications for the UK military involvement in Afghanistan was to help improve the terrible situation for the country's women. It is therefore a bitter irony that when there is a clear opportunity to assist some of the bravest, talented and most inspiring young Afghan women, bureaucratic delays are quashing their dreams."

Film Festival

The city of Herat, near the western border with Iran, has for centuries been a cultural powerhouse in Afghanistan. This March, as part of International Women's Day, Herat hosted Afghanistan's first international women's film festival.

The festival was organised jointly by the Arman Shahr Foundation and the Roya Film House, in cooperation with many other national and international organisations.

According to the organisers around 100 film submissions were received, almost half of which were produced by Afghans.

Spraypainting for social change

23 year old graffiti artist Malina Suliman and her family arrived in India in early January. Ms Suliman's father, a property developer, was injured in an attack after they'd received threats from the Taliban. Ms Suliman's art has provoked strong reactions for its uncompromising portrayals of the status of women in Afghanistan.

Suliman was inspired in 2010 by a workshop held by a visiting British artist. Her signature motif is a skeleton in a blue burqa, which she has sprayed on walls in Kabul and Kandahar. She says she has faced warnings and abuse from onlookers in Kandahar, where she is one of the few female artists. In liberal Mumbai, where is not required to wear a veil, she has tasted freedom.

Her family brought her back from art school in Pakistan before her final year of studies. "My family wanted me to leave art forever," she said. Suliman found Kandahar suffocating. After a revelatory visit to a gallery in Kandahar, she decided to continue with her art. She has shown her paintings, sculptures and installations in Kabul and Kandahar, and anonymously on public walls in both cities.

The Kandahar Fine Art Association, of which Suliman is a member, was founded in 2011. The government has been encouraging. Artists from the collective have succeeded in attracting state funding and have been given space for a gallery; they've even shown their work in the presidential palace in Kabul. In the capital city, Suliman is part of Berang, a well-versed network of artists, some of whom have shown abroad. Among the group, Shamsia Hassani works with the motif of the woman in the blue burqa as well, though her images tend to be less provocative than Suliman's skeleton peeking through the veil.

If Suliman doesn't get a visa extension to stay on in Mumbai, she will return to Afghanistan by March 24. Suliman would be happy in the more agreeable atmosphere of Kabul, but she feels she would be in danger in Kandahar. Her family wants her to give up her work, but she is

determined to continue, wherever she lives.

Behind the Shades

There are more than 1,000 women in the Afghan Army – and about two dozen have made it into Special Forces.

Colonel Jalauddin Yaftaly, who heads the elite units, saw a need for women in the Special Forces to help conduct night raids. In 2011, he got permission to recruit women. He needs more.

During night raids, the Commandos enter the homes of suspected insurgents. The raids to seek out Taliban commanders. It is culturally offensive for male troops to search female Afghans in their homes. With women SF Commandos, it's women searching women.

On the firing range, their gender is hidden behind dark sunglasses, a helmet and scarves wrapped round their faces. On operation, they have wage parity with their male colleagues, who recognise the need for their presence and welcome them. Working alongside men has made these women targets for the most conservative elements of Afghanistan society; perhaps an overwhelming percentage of Afghan society.

Brigadier General Mohammadzai Khatool is the only woman general in Afghanistan. In the 1980s she was a paratrooper, with over 600 jumps. After the Taliban takeover she was forced to stay at home. She believes women are an essential part of the military.

"Men and women are like two wings of the one bird. Working together, both are trying to defend their country and their people," she said.

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