

Afghanistan news round up w/e January 20th 2012
By Caroline Cameron, Great North News Services

If music be the food of healing . . . play on
A CACOPHONY ranging from Asian string instruments to the delicate cadences of classical piano pours out of a two-storey building in central Kabul. Here, at Afghanistan's sole music academy, students are taught music with the hope it will bring comfort in the face of war and poverty, bringing back cellos and violins to revive a rich musical legacy disrupted by decades of violence and suppression. "We are committed to build ruined lives through music, given its healing power," Ahmad Sarmast, head of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, told Reuters. The trumpet player turned musicologist set up the school two years ago on the site of the School of Fine Arts' music department, which was forced to shut in the early 1990s as civil war engulfed the country following a decade-long Soviet occupation. The austere Taliban, who took over in 1996, then banned music outright, something unthinkable in today's Afghanistan, where cafes and cars blast Indian love songs and the tunes of 1970s Afghan crooner Ahmad Zahir. But while the institute's 140 full-time pupils have little recollection of that time, they still face hardships in their musical pursuits. Half the students are orphans or street children, with the rest selected after a music exam.

Afghan police chief escapes suicide bombing
THE police chief of Afghanistan's restive Kandahar province has escaped a suicide bombing outside his office. Authorities say the attacker entered the police station in southern Kandahar city, posing as a resident who wanted to file a complaint. Officials say he managed to make it to the waiting room outside the office of the police chief, General Abdul Razaq, before detonating his explosives. Razaq was not hurt in the blast, which killed no one other than the bomber.

Forty two insurgents killed, over 240 detained in Afghanistan
A TOTAL of 42 insurgents had been killed and over 240 others were detained in a series of military operations conducted by Afghan army and NATO-led Coalition force over the past 20 days, a spokesman for the country's Defense Ministry said. However, he asserted that 18 ANA soldiers and officers have been killed in insurgent attacks, military operations and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blasts around the country over the same period of last time.

386 newly graduates join Afghan National Police
AFTER completion of an eight-week training course, three hundred and eighty six policemen were commissioned to Afghan National Police on Saturday. According to officials, 261 newly graduated policemen commissioned to National Police to discharge their responsibility after receiving certificates in Balkh provincial capital Mazar-e-Sharif. In a similar ceremony, 125 newly graduated policemen received their certificates in Ghazni city, the capital of Ghazni province 125 km south of Kabul.

Kabul's wheels of change
An Australian is helping Afghans change their lives through the power of skateboarding, writes Jackie Dent. HANIFA glides down the slanted ramp, her bright red-and-green traditional garb sparkling as she whizzes across the smooth floor. A little girl with bright-pink knee-pads follows her move, a determined look on her face. Nearby, Fazila has her hand extended, rolling another little girl backwards and forwards on a mini-ramp. The air in the expansive indoor skate park is cool and smells of fresh timber. Two years ago, Hanifa, 14, and Fazila, 16, were eking out a living selling chewing gum in the streets of Kabul to support their families. Now, the pair are paid instructors at Skateistan, what is thought to be the world's first co-educational skateboarding school - a spacious facility with two classrooms, a climbing wall, an array of ramps and walls plastered with colourful children's drawings. Each week, Skateistan says,

up to 400 children turn up to study an arts-based curriculum and learn how to skateboard. Not only are these young women taking home about 9000 Afghani (about \$180) a month but they also recently returned from a youth leadership meeting and skating demonstration in Italy. "I want to be a skate star," a grinning Hanifa says through an interpreter.

The profound transformation of these young women's lives - and swathes of other children and teenagers - has largely come about through the energy and ambition of Oliver Percovich, a 37-year-old Melbourne man who moved to Kabul in 2007.

With just three skateboards, he and two friends turned a decrepit concrete fountain into a skateboard park but realised before long the kids needed to do more than ollies, 180s and kickflips.

Four years on, Percovich, who previously ran an organic bakery and worked as a researcher in emergency management, has seen his NGO move well beyond the confines of a Soviet-era fountain.

A new facility catering for 1000 students is set to open in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif this year. A Skateistan facility has opened in Cambodia and they are looking to build a new skate park. A feature-length documentary about the path to building the Kabul school is touring the international film circuit.

And last month, Percovich was in Cape Town, where Skateistan was a finalist at the Beyond Sport Awards, a new sport-for-social-change initiative set up by the former British prime minister Tony Blair.

Skating in Western culture has long been perceived as an outsider's hobby and the decision by Percovich to use skateboarding as a tool to connect to the poor youths instantly set him apart from the mainstream, and donor, culture. But Percovich - one day dressed in a grey Skateistan hoodie, the next in an elegant, locally made coat with old Arabic coins as buttons - has learnt to play the aid game.

"It is interesting that we got our first money from Norway and skateboarding was actually banned in Norway in 1988," he says.

"Skateistan is still the same thing - [no matter how] I talk about it to an ambassador or a parent of a student here, you've got to stress the things they want to hear. It's simply packaging it in a certain way but keeping focused on what we want to do, rather than what a donor had money for or what a donor wanted to do."

The school and skate park, not far from downtown Kabul, was ultimately funded by European governments and built on land donated by the Afghan National Olympic Committee.

With thanks to . . . VOA News, Xinhuanet, Reuters, IWPR and Sydney Morning Herald.