Afghan News Round Up for May 2013 part two, compiled by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

In High Places

President Hamid Karzai is constitutionally prohibited from running for a third term on April 5 2014. His older brother Qayum will be a presidential candidate.

"Qayum will announce his candidacy soon and will represent our political movement ... the party will run his election campaign," said Mahmoud Karzai in an interview at his home in Kandahar.

Qayum Karzai will have the backing of De Woles De Mulatar Baheer, or the Movement for the Support of the People. Pashtun dominated, the group has no affiliation with Hamid Karzai.

Kabul-based political analysts said that the president would likely support his brother, as insurance against his being investigated for mismanagement or corruption during his own presidency.

Mahmoud said that if Qayum were to be elected, ending corruption would be a top priority. A recent report by the U.N.'s Office on Drugs and Crime said corruption was costing Afghanistan $2.5 billion a year, or about a quarter of the country's GDP.

Mahmoud Karzai was a key shareholder in Kabul Bank during the period marked by a $900 million fraud case. The bank collapsed in 2010. A presidential decree granted immunity to those who repaid funds. Mahmoud denied any wrongdoing, and said he repaid $22 million.

Corruption is rarely publicly discussed, but Finance Minister Omar Zakhilwal recently smashed that taboo in a turbulent session of Parliament. Himself facing potential impeachment, Zakhilwal

publicly named and shamed MPs allegedly involved in corrupt practices.

Speaking in the lower house of Afghan parliament, the Olasi Jirga, on May 13, Zakhilwal accused leading MPs of profiting hundreds of millions of dollars by evading duties on everything from flour to car imports. He accused some lawmakers of importing illegal crates of alcohol from foreign travels, and pressuring him to appoint relatives to lucrative posts in the customs department.

Zakhilwal accused Mohammad Naeem Lalai Hameedzai, a deputy from Kandahar province, of pressuring him to allow the illegal import of nearly 2,000 cars.

First Female Afghan Air Force pilot graduated in 30 years

2nd Lieutenant Niloofar Rahmani, the first female pilot to be trained inside the country in three decades, graduated during a ceremony at Shindand Air Base, along with other eight young Afghan pilots.

The young Afghan pilots were trained by U.S. Air Force instructors and graduated after completing 197 sorties consisting of 145.5 flying hours. They trained on the Cessna 182 fixed-wing aircraft, or the MD 530 rotary aircraft

Nilofar Rahmani said, "First, it was my ambition, and second, I want to show that Afghanistan can have female pilots. It's a job females can do also, it's not a hard job that the men can just do. Both can do it."

The young graduates will now move on to more advanced training, on Cessna 208s or Mi-17s, however Lt. Rhmani is aspiring to be a fixed-wing pilot.

Lt. Rahmani wanted to become a pilot since childhood. She spent a year with the coalition forces learning English in order to qualify to take part in pilot training.

One Door Opens

A female legislator brought a bill before parliament to protect Afghan women and girls from abuses such as child marriage, bride barter and spousal abuse. A group of conservative male lawmakers vehemently objected, saying it was contrary to Islam and Afghan culture. The backlash grew, with protests at Kabul University by students of Islamic law.

Meanwhile, over on the campus of the American University of Afghanistan, the International Center for Afghan Women's Economic Development (ICAWED) on the campus of the American University of Afghanistan was inaugurated by
U.S. Ambassador Tina Kaidanow, University ICAWED officials and Afghan business women, students and faculty. ICAWED, funded by the US, will serve as a hub for Afghan businesswomen, female entrepreneurs, and associations to coordinate and build strong networks.

Ambassador Kaidanow said, "The women meeting within the walls of this Center will build ideas and solutions for the future of Afghanistan's business development. The Center will serve as a training ground for female entrepreneurs and a hub for Afghan businesswomen to network with each other, which – as we know from our experience in the US and elsewhere – is an essential element for their empowerment and success."

Pledging continued support for Afghan women, Ambassador Kaidanow told the audience, "I am proud to represent the people of the US in saying that we will remain steadfast in our support of Afghan women for many years to come. Afghanistan's future will depend on whether women are able to live up to their full potential in every sector of Afghan society."

Disability Agitation

For those with disabilities, Afghanistan is a harsh place. Tens of thousands have been maimed and disabled during decades of conflict. Suitable jobs are scarce, and accessibility is virtually non-existent.

Activist Hussein Karimi lost a leg during the war against the Soviets in the 1980s. He says he couldn't find work, so he started Janbazan council to help some of the more than 100,000 registered war-disabled Afghans. Among other services, the council helps provide vending carts to its 200 members, so they can earn money, rather than beg.

"The government doesn't provide elevators, ramps or roads that help us," Karimi says. "But we can't worry about these issues, because we have to focus on feeding our families."

The annual government stipend of $350 for those with war-related injuries is about what the typical Afghan makes in a month. For the nearly 1 million Afghans disabled from birth or by an accident, there is no financial support.

Hundreds of disabled Afghans took to the streets of Kabul earlier this month, mostly ageing Mujahedeen fighters. They carried coffins — one was to symbolize a man who died at a government clinic while waiting to be treated. The protesters with empty coffins said if the government wasn't going to help them, then the police should simply shoot them in the streets.

President Hamid Karzai agreed to hear their demands, including seats in Parliament, more health and education services, a higher stipend and housing.

Dr. Suraya Paikan, deputy minister in the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled, says the disabled community must be realistic in their demands.

"They want free land, they want free house. It is impossible," she says.

Culture v. Commerce: Which Way to Dig

The ruins of Mes Aynak straddle a copper deposit first exploited 5,000 years ago.

The extraction of the remaining copper will destroy the ruins and the surrounding landscape. The Alliance for the Restoration of Cultural Heritage (Arch), a US non-profit organisation, has led a publicity campaign to prevent the mine, as currently envisaged, from going ahead. Now the World Bank office in Kabul faces an internal investigation for supporting the dig and the mine development.

Several of Arch's four directors, however, have connections to US mining companies interested in Afghan contracts. They are Zalmay Khalilzad, a former US ambassador to Afghanistan, his wife, his business associate in the lobbying firm Gryphon Partners, and a well-travelled restaurateur.

Khalilzad has been openly critical of China's mining companies and a bidding system that, he argues, favours them in Afghanistan. He wrote in 2011. "It is certainly ironic that Chinese firms are at an advantage over western companies due to defence department procedures."

Abdul Qadir Temori, head of the Afghan Institute of Archeology, says the site is so complex and fascinating that experts could easily spend two decades picking over it.

But Afghanistan is desperately poor and leaving artefacts in the ground offers little guarantee of preservation. Desperation and lawlessness have fuelled a ruthless looting industry. Looters have already stripped Mes Aynak of treasures buried untouched for centuries, destroying beautiful buildings and crucial archeological evidence in the process.

The mine will ultimately destroy Mes Aynak, but the urgent need to salvage the site has brought an influx of funds for archaeologists, creating probably the biggest excavation project the country has seen, and plans for a storage site for excavated treasures.

Mine security has allowed work to go ahead in an area that would otherwise be largely controlled by the Taliban, no respecters of idolatrous cultural heritage.

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