

Newsletter, December 18, 2023

Dear friends,

The week before last, a delegation from OFARIN was in Rokha, the capital of Punjir province. Our project manager there, Mudir Yayah, had traveled from Paryan, up in the Punjir Valley. The provincial administration had previously promised us by telephone that it would be possible to continue the lessons in Paryan. When our people arrived at the provincial government, the provincial officers called the Ministry of Education in Kabul again, just in case. This time they were told that lessons in Paryan could not be continued under any circumstances. The information in Kabul was given by the head of the department, Ahmadi, who had already told a delegation from OFARIN in Kabul in September that all foreign organizations providing lessons would either have to convert to Afghan organizations or terminate their contract with the Ministry of Education.

As we were not informed of this in writing, after some hesitation we continued teaching in the provinces, Kabul, Logar and now also Khost. Later, officials from the Ministry of Education visited our classes in all parts of Kabul where we are active. Their written reports were consistently positive. How does that fit together?

We see it like this: the Taliban leadership is divided into two camps, especially on the issue of school and university education for girls and women: one faction is that of Emir Haibatullah Akhondzadah, i.e. the head of state. He only allowed girls to attend school up to grade 6 and banned women from studying. The Emir then became very upset about the protests of foreign organizations against his policies, which were mainly supported by their female employees. This is why he is particularly harassing foreign organizations and their female staff. The other faction is the one that considers good education for all sections of the population to be very important. The Ministry of Education is on the main battle line of this dispute. It is divided into factions from both sides.

Apparently, the majority of not only the population, but also the Taliban, do not share the view of their head of state. In most areas of Afghanistan, you can expect the authorities to turn a blind eye if you don't take official orders on school and education literally. However, Panjir is a special province. Here, the population fought very successfully against the "old Taliban". Even the new Taliban were only able to break the military resistance of the Punjiris with the help of Pakistani drones. Now the Punjir Valley is occupied by Taliban contingents from various parts of the country, and must fearfully submit to whatever the beaules of the top government order.

We pay the staff in Punjir, but suspend classes. The ten classes there have now not worked for more than half a year. The damage will hardly be greater if classes are suspended for a few more weeks.

In the province of Khost, the nut tree program requires a lot of manpower. The 33,500 trenches to collect the winter rainfall and irrigate the seedlings are ready. The people are enthusiastic. The population had promised us 100 workers, who were paid per trench. But over 250 men came every day. The opportunity to earn a living was very welcome. The provincial authorities are also enthusiastic about the huge project. Of course, there are now requests for further reforestation projects. There have even been enquiries from the neighboring province of Paktia.

Despite all the joy, it is important to realize that the project is still far from a success. Now the sites where the trees are to be planted have to be prepared for a good month. Then they will be planted. Hopefully the trees will start growing in March. More precisely: we can only hope that as many of them as possible will grow. And then the huge area must be protected. For example, no animals may be driven there. And the trenches have to be checked again and again to see whether they are still helping to water the trees. After three years, we leave everything to nature and the local population.

So, the project is far from over. But an important part of the most labor-intensive and costly section has been completed.

The women who started the midwifery program in the Kabul district of Shindowal are doing very well. By mid-November, the four midwives had already visited 1200 families. Thirteen families were economically very weak. The midwives recommend moderate support. There were four cases of malnutrition. Four severely disabled persons were identified. 69 pregnant women were registered. They were given detailed advice. To date, 82 women and 110 girls have taken part in information events. The midwives document their work thoroughly with texts and photos and make everything available to the OFARIN office in Kabul and also to us in Germany.

So, things are going quite well at OFARIN. But the restrictions in Panjir are a threat to the teaching program. The obstructions show that the power struggle between the Emir and those who are committed to education for all Afghans and to peaceful, constructive cooperation with foreign countries is still raging.

Tribal assemblies of Pashtuns and other Afghans serve to exchange opinions. This does not necessarily lead to decisions. People can have different views and leave it at that. Peaceful coexistence must not be disturbed because of this. It would therefore not be a solution to remove the emir. It would not be in line with the rules of peaceful coexistence as understood by the Taliban.

The population has come to terms with Taliban rule and is happy with the peace and relative security. No recognizable forces that could make a change of power possible are visible. However, if the Taliban leadership itself did not keep the peace and, for example, remove the Emir, the internal peace would be gone. We therefore must be patient and hope that the pro-education forces will prevail in a process that does not split the Taliban leadership apart.

OFARIN is continuing its projects and is trying not to provoke anyone in the process. In the long run, the forces that do not want to deny education to anyone will prevail. They have the better arguments and the majority of people behind them.

As an aid organization, we have little opportunity to influence developments in Afghanistan. Governments, including our own, could do so more easily. Establishing diplomatic relations would certainly help to strengthen the more progressive forces among the Taliban. The West wanted to establish democracy, the rule of law, human rights and equal rights for women in Afghanistan. That was too much for Afghan society in its current state. The Taliban waged war for their traditional forms of coexistence and won. We have to accept this and should now consider how we can move forward. Should we isolate Afghanistan forever because we have lost? Sure, we should only recognize countries that are committed to international human rights, such as the Russian Confederation or Eritrea or Saudi Arabia or China, or, or, or, ...

You also want to be sure that Islamist terrorists do not settle in Afghanistan again. Will this be achieved by isolating Afghanistan? When a Taliban official appeared as a guest in a DITIB mosque in Cologne, many politicians were horrified. Had the man made anti-Semitic remarks or threatened violence against anything? I didn't hear anything about it. All I heard from the media was that he had claimed that Afghanistan was now peaceful and calm and that he had called on his compatriots to come home to help with the reconstruction. The consensus was that something like this should never happen again: a terrorist in a mosque in Germany.

The Federal Prosecutor General has determined that the Taliban government should not be classified as terrorist. For several German politicians, however, the Taliban are fresh from hell. I have met many

Taliban. They would like to build a functioning state. If you help them to organize proper schools for everyone, you win a lot of friends among them. Noone of them dreams of planning terrorist attacks.

I'm not quite sure about the Taliban, who are also striving to live together now as they always have, in their opinion even at the time of the Prophet Mohammed. There are terrorist organizations in the Orient that want to restore these paradisiacal times by force. Is the Emir Haibatullah really determined to keep such forces at bay? It is also to be feared that internal resistance will form if this emir imposes his ideas on Afghan politics. There are various neighboring countries that would like to fuel such resistance. Afghanistan would then fall back into civil war and anarchy. Is that what we want?

If, on the other hand, we strengthen the Taliban, who want to advance their country in our interests, we help to make Afghanistan immune to terrorism and give the country the opportunity to become an island of peace and progress in a part of the world that urgently needs it.

Perhaps Afghanistan would not have to be recognized diplomatically by countries like Germany. In "democratic times", a transmission line was built to Tajikistan, through which most of the electricity consumed in Afghanistan has come into the country to date. Afghanistan cannot pay this electricity bill. Tajikistan has stopped its supplies. In Kabul there is only electricity during a few hours at night. It would be a gesture that would make many things possible if a country or the EU were prepared to help Afghanistan pay its electricity bill.

Here are some pictures from OFARIN's projects that our colleagues have sent us.

I wish you all a Merry Christmas and all the best for the New Year.

Kind regards

Peter Schwittek.

Captions:



OFARIN: Students writing in Bini Hissar/Kabul



Nut tree planting in Khost. Some finished trenches can be seen in the foreground on the right and on the opposite slope on the left.



Salaries are paid out to a group of workers of the nut tree program.



Information event for women and girls in Schindowal. Dr. Zia Gul explains.



Two of our midwives have climbed up to a family's house. Shindowal lies on a slope of the Kabul mountains in the city center.