

The situation on 20 August 2021

Dear friends,

Events in Afghanistan have overtaken the third August newsletter. What you hear now from Afghanistan feels very different from what was in the August newsletters. These reflected the atmosphere in which we talked about the possible future in Kabul four weeks ago. "Yes, for sure the Taliban will take power. But it is no longer the Taliban that were driven out of Afghanistan in 2001." - "It is not in the interest of a Taliban government to pretend to be extremist. Because that leads to resistance and the various countries near or far would use such resistance to interfere. In no time, there would be a civil war fuelled by foreign countries. The Taliban will see that their coming to power does not lead to acts of resistance."

Hadji Ehsanullah, OFARIN's head of the programme in Logar province, had to come to terms with the local Taliban a long time ago. They told him that we should please finance another class for girls. We told them that there was absolutely no money at the moment. Ehsanullah was not just a link to the Taliban. He was a sympathiser - of OFARIN and the Taliban. He reassured me that he saw good opportunities to continue working even after a change of power.

This morning Ehsanullah called me: "Can you help me get out of here?" It was clear to me then that the transition to Taliban rule will not be smooth, if there will be such a transition at all. What went differently than I speculated in the newsletters?

The differences between the different contingents of the Taliban - between their ideas of the objectives of the war - were much starker than I had imagined. The Malistan district is inhabited by Shia Hazaras. They had shown that they would not fight the Taliban. So Malistan was occupied by the Taliban early and without a fight. They pretended to be tolerant and mild for a week and then started to search for and shoot policemen and other government employees.

Meanwhile, they declared Shiites to be infidels. They have to convert to Sunnis or be treated as infidels. By comparison, Jews and Christians are not infidels. They are protectors who are allowed to continue living for a fee and under discriminatory conditions. Presumably, the Taliban want to drive the Hazara out of Malistan in order to populate it with Pashtuns. Word of such incidents is spreading throughout Afghanistan. People think that the conciliatory signals from the leading Taliban are empty promises, made only to gain power without resistance. Once in power, they forget their promises. But probably the Taliban leadership just does not have the means to control their leaders in Malistan at the moment.

The Taliban have released all prison inmates. It is impossible to distinguish serious criminals from Taliban. When men stop a car to search it, you don't know if they are Taliban policemen or criminals.

Probably four weeks ago my colleagues were already hiding doubts about the peaceful intentions of the Taliban behind their calm composure. Now fear has openly erupted and has become panic. Four weeks ago, no colleague wanted to leave his home. Now most want to get out. When I don't see a way to help them in their distress, they tell me that Mrs Merkel had meant that staff of German aid organisations should also be flown out. It is hard to explain to them that months pass from the expression of an opinion by a German politician to concrete decisions. They still want to be rescued today. There are also rumours that the Australians take \$20,000 for each person who wants to be flown out - pure fear mongering.

I could play all this down as transitional phenomena until this morning. When the Taliban have brought order to their ranks, they will ensure peace and reconciliation in their own interest. However, the reasons driving the Taliban sympathiser Haji Ehsanullah to want to leave his country raise fears of worse.

Ehsanullah reports that those who have taken over Logar province are complete strangers. Many Pakistanis are among them, but also Chechens and Uzbek Islamists. The Taliban's previous leaders in Logar have been cold-shouldered by the new contingents.

Apparently, the Pakistani intelligence service ISI is trying to keep control over Afghanistan. Pakistan had created the Taliban movement. Since then, the Taliban lived on weapons and money received from the ISI. For the Taliban, this dependence was never a matter of the heart. Now the Taliban have the Afghan government's arsenal of weapons. For the time being, they need nothing more from Pakistan. And if they act moderately, they will also be supported by Western countries. Pakistan is threatening to lose its control over Afghanistan. The ISI is now trying to prevent this by sending more loyal personnel to Afghanistan.

Resistance against this has already formed among the Pashtuns of the East in Jalalabad and Khost. There were demonstrations against the Taliban. In Jalalabad, the Taliban opened fire on the demonstrators. The Tajiks in the Punjiro Valley are calling for arms. It smells of civil war.

This does not make it any easier to answer the question of what OFARIN can do in the future. The circumstances are confusing. In any case, we will make every effort to keep the school running as it has been until now. However, school operations have been affected by Corona so far. OFARIN's classes were also working only partially. We had sent money to Kabul shortly before the Taliban moved in. By now it should have arrived. But the bank is closed. It is conceivable that important staff (with signing authority) will take refuge and the money supply for our project cannot be guaranteed, at least temporarily. In case of a civil war, temporary closures of classes are likely.

We are then determined to resume operations in any case as soon as the situation calms down. OFARIN's staffing structures from head

office staff to trainers to teachers allow for flexible reshuffles and reshuffles. OFARIN's newsletters and website will report on any further decisions. Please, have faith in us to come up with something to get our programme through this difficult time!

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek.