

Newsletter, March 13, 2023

Dear Friends,

On March 1, the signing of the partnership agreement between the Afghan Ministry of Education and OFARIN actually took place. In addition to registering with the Ministry of Economy, we must have a partner ministry that will provide content for our work. Until now, this was the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which is responsible for mosques and also for pilgrimages to Mecca. Since the Taliban took over power, people in this ministry had been made responsible for contacts with OFARIN, with whom cooperation was practically impossible. Later, the Taliban government had decided that aid organizations like OFARIN could only offer schooling as partners of the Ministry of Education. Since March 1, OFARIN has been doing so.

It has taken OFARIN about nine months of considerable negotiation and bureaucracy, although the ministry had also embraced the project with goodwill. Previously, OFARIN's teaching had continued at some risk in most places. Now it is properly legal. Where classes had been suspended, they are being taught again. Trainers from OFARIN have attended classes in the mosques of Qalachah and Bini Hissar.

Mullah Mukhtar, the Imam of Bini Hissar, had only allowed religious education classes in his mosque. These were given by our teachers. But OFARIN did not pay them. Now everything is back in order. Everywhere everything is taught and teachers are paid. A specialty in Bini Hissar is that girls are also taught in the mosque. In principle, teaching is allowed for little girls up to grade six, but not in mosques. Thanks to the separation of the sexes, girls must be taught by female teachers. But they are not allowed to come to the mosques on a daily basis because, according to Taliban opinion, they could contaminate the house of God in a dangerous way. Mullah Mukhtar is a timid tactician in political matters and wanted to abide by this commandment of the authorities. But the white beards, which is something like the parish council, decided that girls must also be taught in the mosque.

It was with great joy that we learned that classes have also resumed in our project area in Paryan, in the province of Punjir - which is almost 3,000 meters above sea level. In the Punjir valley, there had been a long period of fighting. There were hardly any telephone contacts because the Taliban and probably also Pakistani military controlled many things. Mudir Yaya, our project leader there, announced around Christmas that people - including the families of our

students and teachers - wanted to leave the area and come to Kabul. Now Yaya reports that the fighting has died down. There are only isolated clashes in the extreme high mountains. In Paryan, the situation is quiet. Classes have begun again.

When we looked for partnerships with ministries other than Religious Affairs in the summer of 2022, we visited the Ministry of Border Affairs, among others. The contacts were gratifying. We decided to bring OFARIN's project area in Logar province into a partnership with this ministry. Therefore, we did not mention this project area with its 20 classes to the Ministry of Education. When the Taliban later decreed that only the Ministry of Education could be considered as OFARIN's partner, we did not want to burden the arduous process of becoming a partner by subsequently changing the project areas and class numbers we had initially specified. Otherwise, negotiations would probably have started all over again. So we would have to bring Logar into the partnership later, as we would have to do with other areas in which we want to become active later. We don't see any problems for OFARIN's classes in Logar. The program there enjoys the goodwill of the provincial authorities. The classes were and are running smoothly.

In the February newsletter I had already suspected that after Naurus, the Afghan New Year on March 21 (the beginning of spring), we expect troubled times in the school and education system. That is when the winter vacations end in the cold provinces, i.e., in most areas of Afghanistan. The as-yet unresolved question of whether girls will be allowed to return to school from the seventh grade onward and whether women will be allowed to study remains unanswered. The head of state, the Emir Haibatullah Akhondzadah, opposes education for women and girls. Powerful ministers, such as the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Defense, are strictly in favor of this education. The majority of the population, not only in the cities, is likely to be in favor of education for girls and women. The majority of Taliban warriors are likely to think like the emir, especially since the emir, as "leader of the faithful," is also a religious authority. So things can get lively.

To make matters worse, the fasting month of Ramadan begins on Afghan New Year's Day or a day earlier or later (this is decided according to whether the new moon was seen or not). This could postpone the decision about the education of women and girls.

If this education is officially banned or if a decision is further delayed, the emir is likely to lose his grip on the schools and universities. If the Ministry of Education does not then distance itself from the emir, provincial authorities or local initiatives will soon take over decision-making power over the schools.

Whatever comes, OFARIN is in a comfortable niche in this dispute. Our teaching is elementary. It is not aimed at bigger girls or at women. So what we do is off the main battle line, around the education of women and older girls. Between us, there are already some classes of OFARIN that are attended by bigger girls and even by women who have not gone to school before. But there they will know how to behave. In any case, we are relaxed about the expected disputes within the Taliban leadership and hope that they will bring a change for the better.

You are probably bored by the many details I have given you. But for us – for Anne Marie and me – they are so gratifying that we will not spare you them. We have prospects for quiet further development. Of course, we want to be personally involved and see what is possible. Therefore, we will travel to Afghanistan as soon as possible. We don't have a tick yet. But in one week we want to be gone. The length of our stay will depend on the opportunities that arise - but also, of course, on the visa situation.

You can reach us in Afghanistan at the e-mail address schwittek@t-online.de.

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek.