

## Newsletter, October 21, 2021

Dear Friends,

On October 9, we held OFARIN's general meeting. Its main purpose was to inform each other. The election of the board did not result in any changes. According to German association law, we are fully capable of acting again. In Afghanistan it looks different. There we are waiting.

After their invasion of Kabul, the Taliban imposed a curfew, which applies from 7 p.m. onward. But then commandos are still on the move from house to house and from apartment to apartment. They are looking for enemies, such as employees of foreign organizations.

Hardly any of OFARIN's employees still live where they lived a month ago. The new neighbors do not know that our colleagues work for OFARIN. How do the commandos know where our employees live? They don't know either. They ask everywhere. Here and there, people denounce others. That's how they get ahead. But much more often, people warn and help each other. People from the neighborhood call: "There were just three armed men at my place, they are obviously looking for you." So far, all permanent employees have been able to go underground in time. In order not to endanger anyone, we are not giving any details.

Who is sending out these commandos? The Taliban leadership keeps asking foreign aid organizations to continue working in Afghanistan because they are needed.

Among other things, the commandos are also looking for citizens who are from the Punshir valley. Their compatriots in the Hindu Kush resisted the Taliban for several days. They are being brutally punished for this. Mass shootings are reported from the Punshir Valley. Punshiri are also being persecuted in Kabul.

Otherwise, judges and prosecutors are targeted in the city, as are individual journalists. Soldiers and police officers of the former government are under threat throughout the country. However, Mullah Mohammad Yakub, the Taliban's defense minister and son of Mullah Omar, the late leader of the "old Taliban," is said to be working to protect government soldiers.

By "old Taliban", I refer to those who ruled until 2001. On this occasion, a word on terminology: a "Talib" is actually a prospective mullah, now also a member of the Taliban movement. "Taliban" is the plural of talib.

In Kabul and elsewhere, young men are being sought to be recruited into military service for the Taliban. In many rural villages, girls fare even worse. They are abducted and married off to Taliban fighters.

In Daikundi province, the Taliban, who are overwhelmingly Pashtun Sunnis, have begun to drive the Shiite farmers of the Hazara people living there off their land and farms. In Malistan, also inhabited by Hazara, the Taliban declared the Shiites infidels after taking power, presumably also as a precondition for their expulsion.

The Taliban leadership continues to proclaim that no revenge will be taken. Former Afghan employees of foreign armed forces should please remain in the country. They are needed as skilled workers. All ethnic groups should be represented in the government. The Shiites should also have an appropriate share in power.

One can assume that the Taliban leaders who are spreading this message are serious about it. Reason dictates that they do. If the predominantly Pashtun Taliban, who make up perhaps 40 % of

the population, were to try to dominate the other ethnic groups or impose radical Islamism, they would soon encounter resistance. Foreign forces would then declare themselves protectors of threatened Afghan ethnic groups. Neighboring countries would find themselves threatened by radical Islamism. A civil war could hardly be prevented.

Nevertheless, the cabinet consists overwhelmingly of Pashtuns. And who sends commandos from house to house, searching for people with whom the Taliban, according to official statements, want to reconcile? Who is chasing defenseless Shiite farmers from their homes and farms?

Obviously, the individual Taliban have different motives than their leaders, who proclaim reasonable intentions from Doha. There are quite different reasons why men joined the Taliban. One did so because the mullah preached that the foreigners had come with their military to abolish Islam. Another became Talib because American planes bombed the family homestead. In the process, his mother and an infant brother were killed. Such things must be avenged. Another has already learned from his father that the Shiites who live in the next valley are not real Muslims. They speak a different language. The river through their valley carries abundant water and makes for good harvests, better than in the valley where he lives. It is an injustice that such people are doing so well. During the war, these people cooperated with the government and with soldiers of the infidels. Yet another Talib was always against imitating everything to the foreigners, as the Kabul government did. In Kabul and other cities, women work together with men from completely different families - in an office, a school or a department store. This is pure immorality. You can't let something like this become common in Afghanistan.

People talked about why they joined the Taliban with their fellow fighters from the area, with whom they attacked government garrisons or raided fuel transports. But why the Taliban took up arms on the other side of the mountains was something you could never talk to them about. Every Talib has something else in mind, what he is fighting for. There was never any agreement on a common war goal. Of course, they wanted to win. And then Sharia law was to be introduced. That would bring true justice. But what exactly does it look like? Are these the rules that the "old Taliban" had introduced back when they were in power? No music, no school for girls; anyone who railed would go to jail. A lot of things were exaggerated, according to many Taliban. It was probably not the right Sharia law after all.

And how to deal with captured government soldiers? "They became soldiers so they could feed their families. What should they have done?" says one. Another says, "No, he fought against us. He would have shot me if I had been unlucky. He must be punished."

And how should people who worked for a foreign organization be treated? "They must be punished. They wanted to help the foreigners to destroy our religion." - "No, they were just running a hospital. A year ago, I was there with my little daughter. If not for them, the child would have died. Where am I supposed to go when they're gone?"

Many questions that arise now have never been discussed among the Taliban, neither among the fighters nor among their leaders. Often, no one knows how to decide.

The Taliban leadership would have to decide many things and convey them to their followers. They have won a war. Nevertheless, they cannot be expected to maintain the kind of military order that we consider effective. Command and obedience do not exist among the Taliban. They make many decisions in tribal assemblies, where everyone who owns a piece of land has a vote. Things are very democratic there. The goal of the tribal assembly is unanimous decisions. Everyone formulates a proposal for a decision. Everyone tries to incorporate the proposals that have been made so far into his proposal. If there is no agreement after everyone has spoken, the meeting moves on. Ideally, in a

final round, everyone proposes the same content. Unfortunately, the interests are rarely such that a common proposal is possible. Then one lives on without a decision and hopes that one will be possible later.

So we will have to wait for many decisions. The Taliban leaders have announced that women will be allowed to continue studying. That was progress. Under the old Taliban, women were not allowed to study. However, classes must be segregated by gender. Female students should be taught only by female lecturers and men only by men. But this would require the right number of female and male lecturers, as well as suitable premises. This is not the case. The lectures have been closed until suitable conditions are created everywhere. This will take some time.

It is also questionable whether all Taliban leaders are actually pulling in the same direction. Afghans divide these leaders into Kandahari and Khosti. Kandahari are the "old Taliban." Many of them were ministers before 2001. They are mostly from the Kandahar area. The Khosti are the Haqqani network, which has carried out attacks in Kabul in close coordination with Pakistani intelligence for over a decade. The core of the network is the family of Jalaluddin Haqqani of Khost. His son, Siradjuddin Haqqani, now leads the network. He became minister of the interior. Tensions between these wings, as well as between other Taliban exponents, are likely to cause many differences between official statements and Taliban actions.

The terrorist attacks of the Islamic State (IS), which are primarily directed against Shiites and educational institutions, are something else. IS attacks always target high numbers of victims. The Taliban and the IS are fighting each other bitterly. It is not clear who supports the IS in Afghanistan. However, the IS warriors seem to be better supplied than the Taliban and the rest of the population. So, the economic situation could drive more supporters to the IS.

The food supply is becoming more and more threatening. There is hardly any money. The Taliban state does not pay its civil servants, policemen and teachers. Until now, anyone with a bank account could withdraw up to \$200 a week in Afghan currency from ATMs. That is no longer possible. The banks have no more money. The Afghani is losing value every day. Hunger is spreading. A friend tells of a neighbor who committed suicide out of shame that he could not find bread for his children.

The world community has raised a billion dollars to provide humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan. The United Nations has been tasked with implementation. It must now move quickly.

The Taliban leadership is dependent on international aid. Foreigners who have found entry points into Afghanistan are free to move about. The Taliban understand that they depend on a good reputation abroad. The Taliban leadership was able to reach an agreement on the free movement of foreigners, including journalists. And their warriors are following this decision.

This gives hope that the Taliban leadership will impose a more acceptable image on its movement. The international community will probably adjust its aid offers to such Taliban efforts. In the worsening emergency, this development is imminent.

The Taliban is a very heterogeneous movement. Until 2001, I met many pragmatists, even among their leaders, who were open to constructive cooperation and were very generous with official ideology. Sure, now they have won a war against the West. They reject human rights and especially equal rights for women. If you want to get along with them, you should not harp on these concepts. If one works practically with them, many contents, which we connect with our basic rights, will arise by themselves. For example, if OFARIN continues to teach in schools, it will be a problem for lady teachers to come to OFARIN's office for training. After a few months, such obstacles will disappear for practical reasons.

Cooperation with a mullah should not start with something basic, like an interreligious discourse. It is better to start by digging a well with him or organizing lessons. If you tackle such tasks together and succeed, trust and friendship will develop.

Afghanistan's plight forces Western countries to establish contacts with the Taliban. They should make use of them. The first step is to organize emergency aid. In return, Germany will negotiate the evacuation of threatened Afghan cooperators of western military and aid organizations. Broader cooperation should also be initiated. The more Afghanistan is included in international exchanges, the smaller the wave of refugees that will come our way. It is also necessary to be present in Afghanistan in order to observe which terrorists are setting up centers there again. On the other hand, if you freeze contacts, you drive Afghanistan into isolation and dependence on dubious friends.

At the moment, no international aid is reaching the people. Many want to get out of Afghanistan. When we were in Kabul in July, no staff member was talking about evacuation. Now they all want to be brought to Germany as threatened co-workers of OFARIN. The Taliban invasion; the commandos going from house to house; the allied evacuation flights until the end of August, which seemed to many to be the last resort; the most improbable rumors gaining in drama from cell phone contact to cell phone contact - all this has affected the people. Their perspectives have changed drastically since our visit.

In July, our staff did not expect any significant changes from Taliban rule. After all, our program had been launched together with the Taliban in 1998. Going to the West at that time meant: an outlay of \$20,000 for the traffickers and a life-threatening journey. Staying in Afghanistan meant a manageable life that people had come to terms with. Now, staying means daily fear. One does not see positive perspectives. People stare at the looming famine.

After the Taliban invasion, Western politicians publicly declared that it was the duty of our countries to evacuate the employees of our institutions. Such statements are appeals to the politicians' domestic audience. The frightened Afghans are desperately snapping at such tails. Our people are now convinced that they have a claim to be brought to Germany. And who is supposed to enforce these claims in Germany? We, the German colleagues.

I have sent a list of all permanent employees and their families to the Foreign Office (about 150 people). The address acknowledged receipt by saying that they don't read most of the e-mails due to overload. Evacuations will not be possible until arrangements are made with the Taliban. That is likely to be a matter of months.

The extent of the threat to each individual cannot be assessed from here. If you have problems with your neighborhood, you run the risk of someone revealing to the Taliban that your daughter works for a foreign organization as a teacher. For none of our teachers can any danger be ruled out, even if we only managed and paid the teacher as a part-time employee. When push comes to shove, the Taliban do not ask about employment status. Our Kabul office is now assembling all the teaching and support staff. That's over 250 people - with families, as many as 1000 people.

Are you doing these employees a favor by bringing them here? If their lives are at stake, sure. But hardly anyone is likely to be happy here. Everyone would have to learn the language. Hardly anyone is young enough to qualify for a satisfactory job. Moreover, evacuation may lead to a reception camp in Uzbekistan or Pakistan for an incalculable period of time.

And what is to be done with OFARIN? OFARIN's teaching has been of great value to those affected so far. It should be continued under all circumstances. It is even more important under the difficult conditions of Taliban rule. But how can this be done when all Afghan staff have left the country?

It will depend on several developments. Afghanistan OFARIN staff will not leave for weeks or months at the earliest. Not all staff will leave at the same time. On the other hand, the Taliban will moderate their behavior in order to get much needed international assistance. This will dampen the fears of the population and also those of our staff.

OFARIN has succeeded in getting money into Afghanistan. This has made it possible to pay the staff. OFARIN's structures remain operational. However, no teaching has taken place so far. The Taliban should agree with the restart. In particular, the circumstances under which girls and teachers participate should be clarified so that the Taliban do not feel compelled to intervene. So far, the Taliban have not yet come to an order that one could find interlocutors with them.

Our colleagues use the money left over after the salary payments to provide "small emergency aid", i.e. to help families of our teachers or students who have fallen on hard times because of the Taliban or also because of Corona.

By the way, the eye treatments of Amena and Mohmen, the children of the widows Khurschid and Zachera, about which we reported in the second July newsletter, have been successfully completed in Kabul. On the other hand, the eye of Fereshda (newsletter of 21.4.) could not be replaced by a prosthesis so far. This operation has to be done in Pakistan. The border to Pakistan is still closed. Fereshda is being cared for by an ophthalmologist in Kabul, so there is no danger of further damage.

OFARIN is determined to participate in the international aid that will be organized by the United Nations for the starving population. This involves targeted distributions of money or food. I have already helped to organize such distributions, mostly in exchange for labor contributions, under the old Taliban.

As soon as such relief operations begin, the Taliban will not be able to accuse those who participate in them. It will be necessary to coordinate with them, so that opportunities will arise to talk to them about other areas of cooperation. OFARIN will try to negotiate conditions for teaching in order to return to the situation that existed before the Taliban took power.

The intentions that I have developed here are not just wishful thinking. We will engage with the Taliban to continue and carry on our work. That is full of uncertainties and will require flexibility. We may have to swallow a toad or two. If you are willing to do that, there is a danger of unprincipledness. We will endeavor to give you an honest account of the possibilities, but also of the dilemmas we are in danger of running into - first and foremost, here in these newsletters.

At the moment, our main concern is to keep our staff in Afghanistan able to work and to provide them with money, even if teaching is not yet possible.

Best regards,

*Peter Schwittek*

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