

Newsletter, September 12, 2021

Dear Friends,

When we were in Kabul in July, we talked to several people about the imminent takeover of the Taliban. It was clear to everyone that it was coming. The people we talked to took it in their stride. They were happy that there would finally be peace. Aid organizations like ours had long had contacts with local Taliban in their project areas. There was no other way. But the experience gained was encouraging. We were sure that continued work under a Taliban government would be possible. Being evacuated from Afghanistan was not an issue for anyone.

The Taliban would be crazy, we thought at the time, if they were as brutal and super-Islamistic as they were during their first rule until 2001. That would quickly lead to internal resistance and intervention by neighboring countries, which in turn felt threatened. Civil war would endanger the Taliban's rule.

The actual transfer of power was much more bitter. On the very day the Taliban entered Kabul, several of our employees were called anonymously: "We know all of you. You worked for a Western organization. You will all be killed." Until then, OFARIN's staff had felt safe. After all, our teaching program had been created in 1998 under the "old Taliban" - and at their insistence. Now colleagues were pushing to be evacuated from Afghanistan.

They made a list of all trainers and office staff and some former staff with their family members. I inquired at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) about the requirements for evacuation. Until when must the employee have worked at OFARIN? Which family members are evacuated? ... The MFA has a crisis e-mail for this: 040.Krise19@diplo.de. This answered immediately: One is completely overloaded. It is not possible to read all incoming e-mails. Please, do not send any more e-mails to this address!

The day after, the list of our threatened employees was up. I called a number in MAF that a friend had given me as a secret tip. A friendly gentleman answered and passed me on to one just like it. The third person could only recommend the standard crisis phone number. It was busy a good 50 times. Then a voice told me that I would be connected to the next available workstation. That happened after another 40 minutes. A lady explained that she only had to answer the phone because of the huge rush, but that she was hardly familiar with the matter. She did not know the conditions for evacuation. I should send the list of OFARIN to the MFA. There they would decide or maybe on the spot - at the Kabul airport. I asked to whom I should send the list. To 040.krise19... I protested. This address told me that incoming e-mails are not read. - I should write there anyway. There was nothing else. I sent the list and sank into myself.

One day later, a young lady called who just attended an event of the Green politician Omid Nouripour in Kassel. She must have been a volunteer with the Green Party and kept commuting to the event, talking to Nouripour's staff, and then coming back out to phone. She told me to send OFARIN's list to the office of Mr. Hemmer, a parliamentarian of the FDP. There would still be chances for an evacuation.

"With whom?"-"With the Americans" It was the day when the last German military planes left. After speaking to Nouripour's team, she corrected herself, "The evacuation flights are being carried out by the Germans. There are still over 400 German citizens in Kabul. They will be flown out next week. Threatened Afghans could also come along. "How many people are there with you?" - "We are talking about 35 employees. With family members, we have about 150 people." She is startled.

We had come across OFARIN in the Nouripour area because two of our teachers had contacted them, feeling threatened. I explained to the lady that we currently employed over 200 part-time teachers, several of whom were certainly threatened. She asked me to make a list of all of them with families, but first wanted to find out what the list should look like. I did not get the information anymore. It would also hardly have been possible to list these thousand or so people, since our office, like all offices, businesses and ministries in Kabul, is closed.

She encouraged me to put pressure on Mr. Annen, the State Secretary in the Foreign Ministry (SPD). He could issue passes, the holders of which the Taliban would let through at the Kabul airfield. But Annen would not do that. Gerd Müller (CSU), the minister for economic cooperation and development, was also skeptical about evacuations. "We want to provide emergency aid and development assistance. For that, we need our local forces. If they are evacuated, we can no longer provide aid." The governing parties do not want the refugee issue in the election campaign. The opposition parties want to expose this government attitude. Mr. Hemmer's office confirmed receipt of our first list.

The problem of the minister Müller has also OFARIN. We also want to continue working in Afghanistan and need our people there.

How endangered are our people in Afghanistan? That was difficult to assess at first. Was there a mass psychosis in Kabul, exacerbated by the short time left for evacuations? Were Afghans now trying to get to the promised land relatively cheaply?

Many people called from Afghanistan, including people with whom we had had nothing to do for a long time, even employees whom we had dismissed for serious reasons. Other Afghans called from Germany and did not understand why we were not doing anything for their threatened relatives. Schleswig-Holstein had agreed to take in threatened Afghans. Didn't I know that? Why didn't I call the state government?

I wrote to all the employees who were willing to leave that here no paradise was waiting for them. They all worked hard for OFARIN. But they were not prepared for a professional life in Germany. They had to learn the language. They are no longer young enough to obtain formal qualifications. It is also to be feared that they will live in camps in Uzbekistan for years after an evacuation.

Again and again, I spoke on the phone with staff members who told me about what they had experienced and learned. Now, unfortunately, I am very sure that our employees are very much threatened. To report details here could create further threats. What our employees have reported, I pass on only verbally. There is still a lot on my mind that I would like to say to the people in Germany and abroad. Perhaps one of you, dear readers, has the possibility to publish such reports and explanations without endangering our employees. I urge all decision-makers to get Afghans out of the country who are under threat. It is a matter of life or death.

In addition to the immediate threat of political terror, all Afghans face famine and bitter cold in winter. It is obviously not possible to get the economy going. People are hiding in their homes, although they are not safe there either. Businesses, stores, offices and government offices remain empty. No one knows how Afghanistan will get through the winter. The Taliban, too, know that international help is bitterly needed and are apparently willing to go along with it.

The international community should urgently make use of this opportunity, not only to negotiate the departure of threatened Afghans. OFARIN's education program came about in 1998 at the urging of senior Taliban leaders at the time. At that time, I met many open-minded and curious Taliban who

were interested in constructive cooperation with other countries and cultures and were very generous with the official Taliban ideology. Probably my partners would have liked to have had contacts with more potent decision-makers in the international community at that time. But the embassies of almost all countries were closed, so they had to stick to leaders of small aid organizations. Afghanistan was isolated from the world community and was thus pushed into the arms of its bad friends.

This mistake should not be repeated. If one wants to stimulate the Taliban movement to desirable developments, one must know and better understand them. This could help to avoid large-scale refugee movements. One should also know much more about what foreign forces are exerting influence in the country. There will be more going on soon. Radical terrorists will also set up shop in Afghanistan. You have to know about that.

The Taliban are not a solid bloc like the mullahs in Iran or the leadership in North Korea. They are very heterogeneous and versatile.

OFARIN hopes to continue working in Afghanistan and is in the process of finding ways to send money to the colleagues.

Warm regards,

Peter Schwittek.