

Newsletter, AUGUST 27, 2022

Dear friends,

This newsletter really comes from Kabul. It is not so easy. Uploading e-mails takes forever. Often it fails.

Also our journey to Afghanistan was hard and expensive. This has hardly anything to do with Afghanistan, dear reader. If this particular adventure with travel providers doesn't interest you, skip down in the text to page three to the paragraph that starts with "The people who flew to Afghanistan ... "!

There it continues with the actual arrival, which was successful only two days later than planned. What we had to experience with the internet travel agency KIWI-COM and the airline Qatar-Airways is so heavy in our stomachs that it simply has to come out.

Last year the journey from Frankfurt to Kabul and back costed about 700 €. Today it is hardly done with the double. There are Internet agencies that offer air travel to Afghanistan. One of them is called KIWI-COM. We got involved with them. Among other things, KIWI-COM offers trips where you have zero free luggage and have to pay hefty surcharges for every kilo you take with you. We had clicked on an offer in the morning. There it cost 1328 €. In the evening, the provider mailed us and told us that the fare was now 1715 €. We finally decided to travel with Qatar-Airways via Doha to Islamabad and from there a good eight hours later with Kam-Air to Kabul. The Afghan airline Kam-Air has no landing rights in Europe and can only be reached indirectly in Germany.

The stay in Islamabad raised the question: Do we need visas for Pakistan? The travel provider even warned us that we would have to pick up our luggage in Islamabad and then check it in again. To do this, we would have to leave the transit area of the airport. We desperately tried to find out more, sent e-mails and tried to call. No answer. At Qatar-Air in Frankfurt nobody answered the phone. Emails were not answered. We tried to call the Pakistani consulate in Frankfurt. In the homepage of the consulate we found their phone number. When we dialed this number, German Telecom reported that the number did not exist. After many attempts of this kind, we were finished with our nerves and decided to book this trip, but to take only hand luggage. This way we did not have to leave the transit area in Islamabad.

When we went to check in with Qatar-Air in Frankfurt, they refused to let us travel because we did not have Pakistani visas. We were shown that according to Pakistani regulations, a visa was required even for staying in the transit area. At the airport, Qatar-Air knew about such a regulation, but KIWI-COM, the agency that sold the flight, did not. At Qatar-Air, nothing was known beforehand because no one answered. At least the ground staff of Qatar-Air was as helpful as possible and issued us a flight to Islamabad for a week later. By then we should have solved our visa problems and bought a new onward flight from Islamabad. But how? ...

We stayed overnight in Frankfurt and went to the Pakistani consulate the next day. To the consular officer who received us, the rule that you need a visa to stay in the transit area seemed as absurd as it did to us. He asked for our passports and discussed the case for an hour with a superior. This one then showed keen interest in what we wanted in Afghanistan. Now we needed a visa, a very special one, which we had to apply for at the Pakistani Ministry of Interior by e-mail. That would take some time. If it was approved, we would receive it upon arrival in Islamabad. Then we were asked again about our stay in Afghanistan. The suspicion arose that the visa we were to apply for had something to do with the curiosity of specific Pakistani authorities about everything that happens in the neighboring country. The further course of this trip was full of uncertainties. We gave up the flights

booked and paid for at KIWI-COM, bought flights with Emirates via Dubai in a travel agency run by Iranians in Frankfurt and from there with Kam-Air to Kabul.

Barely two days later, this second attempt began. If you have traveled via Dubai before and want to do it again, be prepared that the airport there is different from anything you try to remember! The marking of the terminals is completely new. The terminals are also completely different. One should have time, otherwise transferring becomes a stress.

The people who flew into Afghanistan looked little different than they did a good year ago. Very few men had beards. Two gentlemen wore a variation of the pakol, the felt cap worn by Afghan resistance fighters against the Communists. The caps of the gentlemen were wide in the uppermost part of the roof on all sides. This was probably meant to suggest the headgear of the old Taliban, the oversized turban. Three women wore the Arab full-face veil. Most of the others wore customary dresses and a light scarf over their hair. It was the same a year ago. There was a significant difference from the way Afghans dressed during the rule of the "old Taliban". At that time, all women were totally veiled. All the men wore unkempt, long beards.

Shortly after reaching the Iranian mainland, the sun rose. The whole way we flew above a closed cloud cover. On approach to Kabul, we saw that many layers of clouds were piled on top of each other. In Kabul it was barely 20 degrees. The day after our arrival, we experienced what we had been waiting for weeks at home: a calm land rain that lasted for many hours. Wonderful!

In Afghanistan, the weather has changed in the last decades. I remember that in the seventies, during a short rain shower in April, an acquaintance said, "The next rain will come in October or November." You could count on that back then. That changed. For years, there has been more and more precipitation in the summer. True, the summer of 2021 was hot and dry. The harvest was poor. This year, too, it was as hot as ours just a few weeks ago. Now we are the sixth day here and have not seen the sun yet, but a lot of rain. It is cold.

Rain is not only a blessing. The heavy, rain-soaked upper layer of earth slides down on the dry soil of the mountain slopes. Plants that could provide support are sparse. Landslides are frequent.

You are finally expecting something authentic from Afghanistan. But I can only deliver a few fragments. They do not yet add up to a complete picture for us.

In the OFARIN office, the joy was genuine. There, women and men are sitting as usual, partly in the same room. Men and women from all areas also come to the trainers' meeting.

Most of the time I sit on the veranda with my laptop. When staff members, including women, have attended classes somewhere, we sit with them on the veranda and discuss what they have seen. From now on, we will hold such meetings indoors. A Taliban commander and his family now live in the house next door. He sees what is happening on our veranda. On the other hand, a friendly relationship develops with these neighbors.

Nagib drives his female colleagues Ferusan and Sarghuna to Shindowal, where the women are holding a seminar for teachers. Nagib is allowed to drive the women there but not to attend the seminar.

In the afternoon, female teachers come to the office where they are prepared for a new teaching field in a seminar. The seminar is taught by two ladies from our office. I decide not to sit in on it. I'd rather not watch this ladies-only event. Who knows what the participants might spread about it? Maybe I was too cautious. But I prefer to hold off until the necessary sensitivity to the current situation has developed.

The culture war that Taliban ideology has created is being waged on several fronts. Gender segregation is a quiet front. This rule forces organizational changes and a certain increase in personnel. On the other hand, gender segregation can be used against the reduction of women's employment.

The occupation and education of women and girls is the most hotly contested issue. Here the more radical wing of the Taliban is making gains. Women have been dismissed from all state offices. In addition to teachers, lecturers, doctors, midwives and nurses, female bank employees still work to serve the female clientele. The main area of struggle is schooling for girls in grades 7 and above, which has been suspended due to the lack of organizational prerequisites such as adequate facilities and sufficient teachers. Suitable clothing for the schoolgirls should also be created first. It is feared, however, that the higher-level girls' classes will remain permanently closed.

Zabiullah Mujahideen has been known for years as a spokesman for the Taliban. He became deputy minister in the Ministry of Media and Information. When journalists asked him when the girls' high schools would be reopened, he replied, "If it were up to me, the day after tomorrow." After those two days, he was dismissed as deputy minister. Typically, the Taliban do not dismiss its senior representatives but transfer them to other leadership posts. For Zabiullah Mujahideen, there was no fallback position. He was only dismissed. This shows that the Taliban leadership is fighting doggedly about the ousting of women from public life.

Presumably, the misogynists have not considered where the female doctors will come from who will be allowed to treat their wives and mothers, and also the teachers for the little girls.

What I admired about the old Taliban was how confidently they could forget some of their iron rules when they stood in the way of workable solutions. Only when there was controversy and opposition did they resolutely insist on what they had proclaimed. Then their rules could fall victim to the practice of life only when some grass had grown over the disputes. Schooling for older girls is firmly demanded by the population and is contested among the Taliban. It will therefore take some time for pragmatism to unfold.

Restrictions on teaching girls severely hamper OFARIN's work. No classes for girls are allowed in mosques because older girls and women could contaminate the houses of God in a dangerous way. There are also not supposed to be classes in private homes. I have yet to find out whether this is a personal quirk of the minister of our partner ministry or whether there is a Taliban rationale for it. But since this minister is not very insightful, we will have to live with it for now.

Even before we had looked around, mosque communities and groups of women teachers had long since created ways out. Mosque communities often have not only the actual mosque building, but also community rooms. They are allowed to hold classes there, and they do. One imam, in whose mosque we worked, is very cautious and wants to keep strictly to the Taliban guidelines. His community sees it differently. The "white beards," which is something like a parish council, have forced him to allow girls' classes to be taught in the mosque after all.

Teachers who previously taught classes in their homes got together and rented rooms that were available in their area. Now OFARIN's classes are held there from morning to night. The teachers ask OFARIN to hire cleaners for the diligently used rooms. We pay as much for a cleaner as for a teacher, who, however, only works one and a half hours a day. The number of students attending classes is much higher than in the past, when they were held in private apartments. The Taliban do not object to these lessons. However, the teachers have to be careful about cheating with the age limit. Here and there they even accept adult women as students.

Our office manager Abdul Hussain had already told me about this rental concept on the phone. I had resisted it because I saw it as the beginning of paying rent for our classes. Word would get around and our work would become considerably more expensive. There would then be constant threats of dismissal and negotiations about rent increases.

Here in Kabul, our staff explained to us what it looks like in practice to teach in rented rooms. Four teachers, for example, pay 3000 Afghani per month for the premises. 3000 Afghani is currently equivalent to a teacher's salary of 25 €. The teachers pay this rent. Some of them took this initiative before our office found out about it. In their miserable economic situation, they are not concerned about money, but about our teaching. Any complaining about rent payments is out of the question. Of course we will raise the salaries of the renting teachers and also finance the necessary cleaning staff. After all, we then pay rent only indirectly, so that in the future mullahs or apartment owners who provide rooms for teaching have no legal claim to rent. Moreover, the teachers rent at prices OFARIN can only dream of.

For OFARIN, the teachers' initiatives are gratifying. Economically, they are painful in OFARIN's current situation. Additional costs for rent and cleaning staff may be modest. In total, they hurt.

On the drive from the airport to the office, it was noticeable that the traffic had decreased considerably. Aziz, OFARIN's cook, lives in the far west of Kabul. He gets to work before five o'clock because a neighbor who works in the big bazaar for fruits and vegetables gives him a ride. He used to come by public bus. These minibuses are parked in the west of the city, waiting for passengers. When they are full, they leave. Now they don't leave for a very long time because they don't get full. The people who used to go to work are unemployed.

We haven't seen much of the economic misery yet. The employees we deal with here in the office are paid, albeit modestly and not always on time.

We are particularly concerned about Tooba, who works in the office as a trainee. Tooba is no more than thirty years old and somewhat heart-sick. Her mother has been dead for a long time. A year and a half ago, her father died. Tooba had to move in with an aunt, although she did not have a good relationship with her aunt. Now the relatives have fled and Tooba lives privately for rent. Such a thing was impossible even before the Taliban rule. A person without a family connection is lost - especially a woman. If the Taliban find out about this case, they will take action without us being able to protect Tooba. Without OFARIN's income, she is also economically lost. Tooba's brother lives in Mainz with his wife, a hospital doctor. Both would like to have Tooba with them. Perhaps someone reading this can think of something to say.

Just in case, we would like to share with you our new Afghan phone numbers. From Europe: 0093-790 911 835 (Anne Marie Schwittek) and 0093-790 911 631 (Peter Schwittek).

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek.