

Newsletter, February 27, 2023

Dear friends,

this newsletter will be short. There is little news about our program. If you don't want to get into the details of our lessons, you can spare the following. Only when the sign (x) appears at the beginning of the line, it is about Afghan politics.

The protocol (the contract) by which the Ministry of Education and OFARIN are to become partners has been about to be signed since the beginning of the year. Our Afghan colleagues visit the Ministry two or three times a week to discuss any final uncertainties and to find out what signing date they can hope for. The other day it was even supposed to happen the very next day. But the ceremony was to be attended by nine officials from the Ministry.

Unfortunately, one of them had to go to a funeral and so it did not work out yet. Now it is supposed to happen on March 1.

Why is this partnership important for OFARIN? Purely formally, we have to have a partner for what we are doing. The previous partner, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, had been occupied by the Taliban with personnel with whom no cooperation was conceivable. Therefore, since May 2022, we have been trying to become a partner of the Ministry of Education. In the meantime, the Taliban reasonably decreed that for organizations like OFARIN that seek to provide schooling, only the Ministry of Education may be a partner.

The partnership does not put OFARIN's education on an equal footing with public education, that is, education organized by the Ministry of Education. Our students, if they want to comply with compulsory education, must also attend a governmental school or a school recognized as a private school. This is justified in terms of content, since OFARIN does not offer all subjects, e.g. history. In return, we have great freedom in the organization of instruction and do not have to comply with regulations, which contribute significantly to the fact that governmental and also state-recognized private instruction are very inefficient. However, transitions of students who have only been in OFARIN's classes to the governmental school are easily possible. The public school conducts an entrance exam, in which OFARIN's students usually do brilliantly, and the student goes to the public school from then on. With the partnership agreement, much will remain the same for OFARIN as it has been. That is what we need for the foreseeable future. However, we will still only be able to provide a few hours of instruction each day because of our students who also

want to comply with compulsory education. In the longer term, thanks to the partnership, it should be possible to develop mixed forms with the public school system.

At the moment, however, we are not yet a partner. This makes visits by our male trainers to the boys' classes and our female trainers to the girls' classes delicate, because the classes do not yet have a legal basis. At the Bini Hissar mosque, our classes currently meet only for religious instruction. The teachers are not paid. Once the protocol is signed, the Imam of the mosque will allow our normal classes again and we will pay the teachers again. By the way, the imam, under pressure from the "white beards", that is, the parish council, will allow girls' classes to work in his mosque.

We have left it up to the classes to comply with the local situation. Some classes were given leave. Most classes continued to work. However, many classes have not been seen regularly by their instructors.

Once the protocol is signed, many things will return to normal. Then we will also try to officially clarify the status of our female office staff. Thanks to Taliban gender segregation, we need these women to supervise and train teachers and to attend girls' classes. We hope to come to an agreement with the local religious police to allow female staff to return to work in the office.

(x) The appalling slowness of the Ministry of Education is in not directed against OFARIN. We are welcome partners to the Ministry. It is the calm of before an expected storm. Officials do not know what kind of future they are facing.

Within the Taliban leadership, schooling for high school students and study for women is controversial. Classes have been banned. To avoid open rupture, moderate Taliban leaders claimed it was only a matter of establishing technical requirements. Gender segregation is undisputed. But this would require more female teachers and professors and additional rooms. Once these conditions are met, the women and girls should continue their education, the moderate Taliban said. But the reactionary Taliban were serious.

The Emir of Afghanistan, Mullah Haibatullah Akhondzadah, decreed that there would be no more classes for women and older girls. The Emir, the head of state, was a compromise candidate from the second row of the Taliban. Abdul Ghani Baradar had been expected as head of state. He had played an important role in the withdrawal negotiations with the Americans. But he was no friend of Pakistan, whose help was still needed at the time the government was formed.

For the Taliban fighters, Haibatullah Akhondzadah's path to the top of the state, which is not exactly triumphant by earthly standards, does not matter. Now he is emir. That is also a religious title. Moreover, he is likely to embody the attitude of the mass of ordinary warriors. Most of them did not go to school themselves. But they probably know the promise of social advancement associated with school and suspect that it does not concern them. School had been an enemy image in the propagandistic agitation of conservatives for decades. "School is sin" is a common catchphrase. And the first thing to be saved from sin is girls. The ordinary Taliban can no more free themselves from such ideas than can their religious leader.

Powerful ministers see things differently. They know that one must not scare away countries on whose help one depends with arch-reactionary fluff. They also know that Afghanistan will have a tolerable future only if education is promoted. The powerful interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, and the defense minister, Omar Yaqub, a son of Mullah Omar, the emir of the old Taliban, were appalled and visited the emir to change his mind. The emir did not comment. But Serajuddin Haqqani holds large meetings in his home province highlighting the importance of schooling.

So the education issue for girls and women is completely open. A show down will not take place until classes begin again. During the winter, from the end of November until the Afghan New Year (March 21), government schools and universities are closed - unlike OFARIN's schools, which are active in the winter.

It cannot be ruled out that nothing will change abruptly after the New Year, especially since this New Year marks the beginning of the fasting month of Ramadan. But it is likely that the emir will then lose his grip on the education system. Already, the important provinces of Balkh, which includes the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat have rejected the emir's decision. In these provinces, all girls can go to school and study.

We - Anne Marie and I - plan to travel to Afghanistan around the Afghan New Year. This is because we have a visa that allows us to enter comfortably, but it will expire soon. Also, we expect changes in the teaching system in the spring, and want to position OFARIN properly with our Afghan colleagues.

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek.