

## Information Letter, March 25<sup>th</sup> 2021

Dear friends,

The road in front of our Kabul office has received a concrete pavement. Finally! The parallel streets had been provided with it long ago. Only our residential street remained an unpaved track. We, the residents, had a small section concreted five years ago at our own expense. These 110 meters of evidence of limited public spirit now had to make way for the new road surface. A gift! Now it is easy to get from the main roads to any property at any time of the year. What lasts long, becomes ...

No sooner was the work completed than it became known that important pipes would have had to be laid under the fresh concrete pavement. The concrete must be removed again - at least in large part ...

This is not the first time that road construction projects in Kabul have taken this course. I don't yet know what the reason is for the faulty planning in our street. In previous cases, it was always due to the self-importance of high officials in the building authorities. The administration is well aware of the operations that are necessary to build a paved road properly. But in Afghanistan it is very easy to hurt the pride of a department head, for example, the one responsible for laying drainage pipes. One only has to ask him to lay his pipes soon, because the means and the manpower for the road surface are already available. A department head who is offended in this way cannot then lay the pipes for reasons of honor. This, in turn, cannot be tolerated by the head of department who is responsible for the road surface. The honor of his family is also important to him. He must now have the pavement applied without the pipes being laid.

The fact that Afghan society produces high-handed leaders like these department heads in abundance is explained, for example, in the **Ethno-Krimis** that you can find on the **ofarin.de** website and download free of charge (but unfortunately only in German).

One may think about the political developments in and around Afghanistan. The U.S. President Trump had unexpectedly negotiated with the Taliban last year about the withdrawal of the American troops and promised this withdrawal. The elected Afghan government and allies, who had previously shared military and civilian support for the Afghan government with the U.S., were caught off guard by this sudden decision. The U.S. military also felt caught off guard and pursued the withdrawal so cautiously that it could not be completed during Trump's term. The outgoing president ordered the end of the withdrawal before May.

Until 2001, Afghanistan was ruled by the Taliban. They had installed an extreme Islamic regime that despised the rights of people, especially women. Radical Islamic extremists, such as Osama bin Laden, had taken up residence in Afghanistan and from there organized the attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington.

Strictly speaking, Pakistan's intelligence service ISI had created the Taliban movement along with its ideology. The ISI thinks it is representing national Pakistani interests by keeping Afghanistan weak and backward. After all, Afghanistan lays claim to Pakistani territories. And if Afghanistan pacts with Pakistan's arch-enemy India, it becomes a deadly threat to Pakistan. Pakistan ultimately receives the funds to support the Taliban from the United States. The U.S. subsidizes Pakistan lavishly to prevent its nuclear bomb from falling into the hands of radical Islamists.

In 2001, the U.S. drove the Taliban out of Afghanistan. Many countries sent experts to help build a democratic constitutional state. Radical terrorists were not to re-establish themselves in Afghanistan and threaten other countries from there.

The foreign aid workers were hardly able to realize their noble intentions. The mentality of the Afghans was too foreign to them. They were guided too narrowly and without understanding by distant bureaucracies. They were supposed to spend far too much money in Afghanistan without being able to control its use in a serious way, or even being expected to do so.

Thus, the international community created a monstrous corruption. Mafia-like structures flourished, fighting each other with murder and manslaughter. The Afghan leader Karzai begged the Afghan oligarchs to invest the money they had diverted from foreigners in Afghanistan. At least that way it would benefit the domestic economy. Instead, the oligarchs preferred to put their loot into construction projects in the Arab Emirates.

After the fall of the Taliban, the task was to appoint a provisional president, then to adopt a constitution, finally to elect the actual president of the state, and then to elect the national parliament and the assemblies of the provinces. Before the selection of the provisional president, the U.S. special envoy, the Afghan-born diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, told the press that the former king, who had returned from exile, had no ambitions for government office. The king did not know about this until then. But it was not possible for him to run for office after all. The people had understood what democracy should look like, which the world community granted them. The U.S. Bush administration at the time obtained the desired interim Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, who then had to become and did become president. The U.S. government had chosen Karzai because he had little popular support and because it thought he would be easy to lead. Easy to lead he was not.

At least an international contingent of troops made it possible for the first steps toward rebuilding the Afghan state to take place. The U.S. troops initially played a special role under the title "Enduring Freedom." They apparently saw a role in exacting revenge for the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. They kicked in doors, patted down women for weapons and bombed homesteads where they suspected Taliban. In short, they let it all hang out. This revived the Taliban movement. Pakistan had the same interests as before 2001 and again encouraged the Taliban to grow stronger, largely with U.S. funding.

Public reports from the U.S. military indicate that the U.S. was well aware of the schizophrenic situation of financing the Taliban through Pakistan on the one hand and defending the Afghan state with its own soldiers against the Taliban on the other. But even the Obama administration could not bring itself to resolve this contradiction. For the world power USA, Pakistan and Afghanistan were far away. Presumably, a lasting peace solution would have cost more than simply letting everything continue. For the Afghans and Pakistanis concerned, it is hard to understand that they are not at the center of the Americans' thinking and planning. That's why they explain the U.S.'s conflicting commitment with audacious conspiracy theories.

Trump's withdrawal decision has ended this state of limbo. The withdrawal has largely been carried out. At most, its conclusion can still be postponed. A replenishment of troops to the necessary strength is inconceivable. Has the greatest dealmaker of all time betrayed everything that was envisaged for Afghanistan in 2001? No, even without Trump, the international community could not plant democracy and the rule of law in the minds and hearts of Afghans.

But Trump, in negotiations with the Taliban, demonstratively bypassed the elected Kabul government, which had made every effort to carry out the democratization process desired by the West, including the United States. He simply ignored Pakistan's role in the negotiations. Trump only wanted the withdrawal. He needed it for the election campaign. He was resigned to the Taliban's unconditional seizure of power as the result of his negotiations.

What is impressive here is not only the brutal indifference with which he played with the fate of people and the unscrupulous treatment of allies and partners. The shortsightedness of Trump's decisions is also breathtaking. A Taliban takeover is unlikely to spare the world, including the United States, any further problems with Afghanistan. China and Iran are neighbors of Afghanistan. Neither is likely to remain indifferent to the rule of radical Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan for long. The country would remain a regional trouble spot. Taliban rule would very quickly cause a large movement of refugees out of Afghanistan. This would become a problem for Asia but also for Europe. There is no reason to hope that radical Islamists would not take root in Afghanistan. A Taliban state cut off from the West would be forced for economic reasons to make concessions to any halfway potent donor, as the Taliban once did to Osama bin Laden. Afghanistan would again become an ideal base for a terror center, for an Islamic State or a breeding ground for attacks all over the world.

The Biden administration will not be able to make a stable overall solution for Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and other neighbors out of the situation that has fallen on its feet. President Obama has not been able to do that in a much more comfortable situation. But a solution for the Afghan warring parties is conceivable.

So far, they have shown no inclination to negotiate constructively. Trump has led the Taliban to believe they are on the verge of final victory. The Kabul government believes that it is enough to convince the Americans of the Taliban's wickedness for them to reverse the withdrawal agreement. Both sides must work their way into the idea, which is completely new to them, of sharing power, resources and tasks with each other. Think of the concrete ceiling on the street in front of OFARIN's office when the opportunity arises!

Let's take a closer look at the Taliban's ties to Pakistan and the ISI! This relationship has never been an affair of the heart. Pakistan dominates the Taliban only through material contributions - weapons and money. Pakistan is not an occupying power. It cannot secure its rule with detentions or even executions. If the Taliban could be given an adequate share in the Afghan government, they would be independent of Pakistan. Then they could moderate their Islamism. The ISI had prescribed this for them in order to give them the nimbus of special piety and to keep Afghanistan backward and isolated from other countries. The Taliban adhered to this ideology because they depended on Pakistani support. With a constructive arrangement with the current Kabul government, the Taliban would no longer need this. Presumably, such an agreement would not be free for the United States and its allies. But it would be cheaper than the current state of affairs, since the military effort would be reduced.

Incidentally, the U.S. negotiator is once again the Afghan-born diplomat Zalmai Khalilzad, whom Afghans have distrusted since he clumsily stumbled into running for interim president as special envoy in 2001. This time, he had already negotiated with the Taliban under Trump. It was probably not a good idea for the new U.S. administration to continue entrusting this gentleman with the sensitive Afghanistan issue. Whoever leads the negotiations will need a lot of patience and time. There are no easy ways that lead to peace.

Political developments in Afghanistan will affect OFARIN's actions. As described, there are reasons to hope for a peaceful development. But even if the Taliban should gain predominant influence, I do not see black for OFARIN's work.

OFARIN began its school program during the Taliban's rule at their request. The attitude of the followers of this movement towards schools and the role of girls was completely different from that of the Taliban leadership. At that time, the Taliban were forced to be anti-education because Pakistan demanded it. The Afghan education system was to wither away so that Afghanistan would

remain backward. Officially, the Taliban leadership could not resist because it desperately needed Pakistan's support against its internal enemies. But the vast majority of the Taliban knew that Afghanistan needed a proper education system. They supported our educational efforts as much as they could. Today, the conditions for such blatant Taliban dependence on Pakistan are lacking. Our project area in Logar is largely dominated by Taliban. We work there without any problems. The Taliban sometimes ask us to open more classes. Also, many Taliban supporters still remember the good cooperation with OFARIN in teaching.

Germany and many other countries joined forces in 2001 to help Afghanistan become a democratic constitutional state in which men and women have equal rights and in which properly functioning authorities ensure that people live together in solidarity and the economy flourishes. OFARIN had also set out to participate in this construction. Nothing came of the good intentions.

There are many reasons why this was the case. There were far too few qualified personnel available to carry out these tasks. Huge amounts of money had to be spent far too quickly. There was no meaningful international cooperation among the helpers. Perhaps one should have started with limited objectives. The initial focus could have been on rebuilding parts of the state administration. The Afghan civil service emerged from the 19th-century emirs and still sees itself as an authority. One could have begun by making it clear to the senior figures in the administration that they are service providers for the population by closely controlling them in the management of finances.

In view of the conditions in Afghanistan, with its seemingly perpetual armed conflicts, many people in Europe consider aid efforts in Afghanistan to be a waste of time. Does this also apply to OFARIN's program?

OFARIN has taught young people basic cultural techniques: reading, writing and some arithmetic. They can now read laws and contracts, write letters and reports. They can check a bill. They have solved quite difficult text problems in mathematics. They trust their intellect. They act with foresight. At OFARIN, their teachers have learned teaching methods that did not exist in Afghanistan before. These methods are easy to understand. Above all, they are useful. The students learn a lot and master what they have learned. They can do much more than the students of state schools. As a teacher, where the students really learn something, you are proud of your work, and you are recognized and respected in your environment.

All of this would have been helpful for life in the democracy that Afghanistan was to become. Now it's not going to become a democracy anytime soon. Was what students and teachers learned therefore useless? This knowledge and skill are a great personal benefit for all concerned. Since OFARIN has been working in Afghanistan, there is neither a proper democracy nor a rule of law there. There are always attacks, explosions, assaults and kidnappings. Property is not safe, if you have any at all. But still, you go to OFARIN's classes and are happy to learn something.

The German government has spent billions on civilian aid in Afghanistan alone since 2001. When you see the results, it's easy to say: this money has been wasted senselessly. OFARIN's program has cost only a paltry fraction of the government's effort. It is a pity that much more was not available for it.

Best regards,

*Peter Schwittek*

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