

## Newsletter, MAY 24, 2023

Dear friends,

In the meantime I have visited the provinces of Khost and Logar.

To get to OFARIN's project area in Logar, you drive 70 km. It takes two hours. In 1990, I had started the program with Haji Faruq, a dear friend and former student at the university. Later, Mirakhan was committed to helping expand the classes to the Pashtun areas further west. Both fathers of OFARIN's Logar program are unfortunately no longer alive. Ehsanullah, a son of Mirakhan, runs the classes with great dedication and political skill. For security reasons, I had not been there for 15 years. It was just nice to be back in the green valley.

At this time of year, classes there start early in the morning at half past five. This is done in small mosques. A class of twenty to thirty students is seated in the main prayer room. A smaller anteroom is separated from it by an open wooden grille and a passageway. In one mosque, an elderly man lay in the vestibule. The communities accommodate transient guests in the mosques. The gentleman in the anteroom was not disturbed by the classes that were taking place practically next to him. He was asleep.

What we saw of the classes was neat. We were able to visit three out of a total of 40 of our classes in Logar. Colleagues from the Kabul headquarters had been to Logar several times. They had also done in-service training for teachers. Still, we need to think about how we can better overlook what is happening beyond Kabul from headquarters. Logar is not all that far from Kabul. You can't travel there and back to Paryan in Punjir province in a day.

The same is true for Khost. That's where we went to find out if we should start a teaching program there. Of course, we saw some of the agricultural initiatives of our colleagues that we had reported on in April. Then we visited private schools that our friend Khazan Gul has built with the help of German and Swiss initiatives. Khazan Gul's eight schools, each with 600 students, are enjoying a strong influx.

Finally, we visited Maulawi Said Wassim (Haqqani), the president in charge of education in the province. "Maulawi" means "mullah." The president received us very warmly and urged us to become active in his province. Especially the inhabitants of the mountainous outskirts of the Khost plain lived in a very archaic and warlike way. They are often nomads who settled down one or two generations ago. There have never been any schools there. These people should not be excluded from social, cultural and economic life.

Meanwhile, Hewad, OFARIN's chief financial officer, a son of Khazan Gul, has been to Khost once again. He has suggested suitable sites and found potential leaders for our program. We are determined to make common cause with Maulawi Said Wassim and start in Khost.

I did not expect such a strong desire among the population to learn in this area. In Khost, Pashtun tribal traditions are most highly developed and even codified under the title of "Pashtunwali." They are upheld by the people. It is all based on the man's defensibility and has a lot to do with blood revenge. When you hear stories of the people there, you imagine warlike ruffians. When you are there yourself, you meet thoughtful, responsible, far-sighted people. A mullah who was waging war against our country just a few months ago is urging me to join him in building schools.

Since I have been in Afghanistan, I have seen that the Hazara people are eager for education. The explanation for this is obvious. With their East Asian appearance, the Hazara are obviously an ethnic

minority. To make matters worse, as Shiites, they are also a confessional minority. So, they have no chance in the distribution of posts in the government or the army. They are disadvantaged in disputes over land ownership. Their only chance to gain some influence is to be better educated than other Afghans.

In contrast, the Pashtuns were seen as defenders of their time-honored traditions. They viewed new knowledge skeptically at best. Shortly after we arrived in Afghanistan in 1973, a German aid worker working in Kandahar told us that he had admonished a father to send his children to school. When the man asked why he should, the German explained that he wanted his children to be better off than he was. The Afghan then asked, "I am Pashtun. I am a Muslim. What better can you be?" The Pashtuns I met in Khost in 2023 were not at all so self-assured. They realize that their current knowledge is not enough for today. They want to learn more.

How did this change come about? First, it should be said that the change in Kandahar, where the conversation took place in the 1970s, is probably not quite as violent as in Khost. Afghans divide Taliban leadership into Khosti and Kandahari based on the origins of those rulers, with Khosti considered more progressive and Kandahari more backward. But aside from the fact that Taliban leaders also come from entirely different parts of the country, this classification is fuzzy. Sure, Mullah Haibatullah, the Emir of Afghanistan, has spoken out against educating girls. He is a kandahari. But Mullah Yaqub, the defense minister and the son of Mullah Omar, the head of the old Taliban, is also Kandahari. But Mullah Yaqub is very committed to the education of girls and women. The head of OFARIN's former partner Ministry of Religious Affairs expresses his Khosti affiliation by adding "Haqqani" to his name. However, he is not from Khost, nor does he see any point in school education, even that for boys.

But among the population of Khost and in the neighboring provinces of Paktia and Paktika, the desire for schooling is very strong. My colleagues attribute this to the fact that many men from these provinces have gone to Arabia and the neighboring oil states as laborers. There they experienced how they, as uneducated men, had to do the heavy physical work while somewhat better educated Palestinians, Indians or Europeans gave them instructions. Khost and its neighboring provinces lie on the edge of the Indus Valley. More precipitation falls there than in the steppes and deserts of Afghanistan's west and south. Khost and its neighboring provinces are more densely populated. The pressure to earn money far away was and is particularly strong in Khost and the surrounding area. This is now followed, with some time lag, by a particularly strong desire for more education.

What do you learn about Afghanistan from the German media? Does it say anything about a mullah who asks a foreigner, with whose country he was recently at war, to build schools with him? Certainly not. What you read, hear or see about Afghanistan is that girls' and women's lives are restricted there in the public sphere and that they are deprived of all educational opportunities. That is true. But is that all there is?

What else have you learned about Afghanistan in the last week? You may have found in a major newspaper that Iran is demanding promised water from the Hilmand River from Afghanistan. The Hilmand flows from the mountains of central Afghanistan across the country to the southwest. It eventually crosses the border into Iran, where it ends in the Hilmand terminal lakes. Please don't check this story off under "environmental disaster" right away! I remember almost the same dispute at the beginning of the seventies of the last century. The Shah of Persia had bribed the entire Afghan parliament, and the representatives of their people had agreed to the Shah's wish to leave the waters of the Hilmand to the use of Iran. Iran had even been promised more water than the Hilmand carries. In southwestern Afghanistan, the course of the Hilmand is lined with fields, while the area is otherwise mercilessly arid. This irrigation in Afghanistan would no longer have been possible. The

insanity was not enforceable. So, the dispute over the Hilmend water is old hat and a marginal issue for Persia. Seen from Tehran, the Hilmend end lakes and their surroundings are a small area behind the vast salt deserts of eastern Iran. The issue is played up in Iran when the regime there needs nationalist stirrings to distract from other problems.

What else have you learned about Afghanistan in the last week? I guess you don't know that last week the prime minister of Afghanistan was replaced. Yes, you read that right: the chairman of all the ministers - comparable to the chancellor - you can say prime minister if you want. He was indeed replaced a few days ago. We Germans don't learn such trivia from our media. For them, there are only young girls and women who are not allowed to learn anything. They are to be pitied - no question about that. But wouldn't a new prime minister also be worth mentioning?

Well, you don't have to hang this change as high as a change of head of government in Germany or England. The competencies of the Afghan authorities and ministries are not strictly separated. The area of responsibility of one authority is never safe from the encroachment of other authorities. It would be difficult to explain to the Afghan cabinet what is meant by the prime minister's directive authority. The previous prime minister, Maulawi Hassan, was a great among Taliban leaders. However, he was marked by age and no longer up to his tasks. Thus, he also left behind hardly any sphere of authority of his own. He no longer had the strength to defend one against other ministers. The Taliban leaders saw that the burden had to be lifted from Hassan's shoulders and appointed Maulawi Kabir, a young but largely unknown man, as prime minister. He will need some time to get up to speed on the duties of his office.

While Mullah Hassan is a Kandahari, Mullah Kabir is from Paktia, so he belongs to the Khosti. However, he has lived in Baghlan in northern Afghanistan for some time and also owns land there. As far as school and education are concerned, he is considered modern. Mullah Kabir, however, has to fight for his authority. One should still take some time to assess him.

Dear friends, my son has strongly advised me not to try to impose too much on you at once about Afghanistan. I almost agree with that. My stay in Afghanistan will end before Pentecost. However, the experiences I had and the conversations I was able to have, have given me further ideas. I am still pondering over some things and have not yet been able to classify them appropriately. I would like to say other things. But that is not yet fully developed. And it would exceed the extent that my son recommends to me. So I'm thinking of sharing with you soon a few more thoughts about afghans that have come to me. Probably they can be sorted and formulated over the holidays and then shared in another newsletter.

For today I say goodbye and wish you a Happy Pentecost.

Best regards,

*Peter Schwittek.*