

Newsletter, AUGUST 14, 2023

Dear friends,

I am writing these first lines on the day of the date of the headline. Tomorrow is Dsheshen, i.e. a national Afghan holiday, this time for the withdrawal of the Americans and their allies two years ago. Many Afghans associate this day with the hope that the Taliban will lift restrictions on education. Girls will be allowed to attend schools again, women will be allowed to study. Female employees of foreign organizations will be allowed to return to their jobs.

Unfortunately, there is not a single announcement from any member of the government to substantiate these beautiful expectations. Our staff heard the nice news from high officials in the Ministry of Education. Many citizens are talking about it. However, officials have always added that there has been no official announcement so far. Thus, the rumors express the wishes of the population. I think it is rather unlikely that these wishes will come true.

Some who spread these wishes as facts have even speculated further. For example, there are rumors that the Taliban will cede several provinces to the United States. Some even know which provinces are involved. Most of them are in the southwest. The rumors about the normalization of classes are not quite so obviously false. But they are likely to be false nonetheless. I agree with my colleagues on that. It's also hard to imagine publicly announcing a major policy change on a prominent holiday. It would make those who abandoned their policies look like pathetic losers.

Now it is a day later. And in fact, no change in policy has been announced in Kabul regarding girls' learning opportunities or aid workers' job opportunities. That leaves only a little hope that such a change in policy has nevertheless been adopted. However, one cannot triumphantly announce them to the enthusiastic public. One can introduce such changes, if at all, only as if in passing, so as not to offend opponents. But that at least this will happen is rather unlikely.

Thus, we will hardly be able to expand our teaching program for the time being. We will only be able to cautiously continue the classes for girls. In some places we may even have to close classes. When we are in Afghanistan, we will have a better overview of how many classes are working officially, how many classes are working in secret, and how many classes are not working. It would be possible to expand the program for boys right now. But we want to maintain gender equality among the students. Currently, the focus is on keeping our teaching team fit so that activities can be expanded quickly, as soon as that is possible.

In order to make normal classes possible again, help from German or European politicians would be necessary. That the Taliban leadership is divided into two parties with opposing views on freedom of movement and education for women and girls is quite obvious. The party that has the more progressive attitudes also quite obviously associates this with the fact that enforcing its ideas would serve the internal pacification of Afghan society and significantly improve relations with foreign countries. In this dispute, a concession from abroad would be helpful. It would certainly cost money, too. But money is already being paid by the international community - by financing parts of the public service and food supplies.

Most importantly, many times the money not spent now is likely to be needed later to alleviate hardship and repair damage. Concession now would show both parties that a good relationship with Western foreign countries is beneficial to Afghanistan. Foreign countries could certainly negotiate concessions for their concessions.

But foreign countries, especially the foreign media, do not perceive the deep rift between the Taliban parties and treat the Taliban as a closed bloc. The media report on the suffering of women and girls, for which only the reactionary Taliban party is responsible, and put the whole of Afghanistan in a corner for this. This does not help women and girls. It is understandable that our foreign minister loses track of the sideshows of this world in her official transportation problems. But she heads a ministry where there should be competent staffs for the different areas of the world. Unfortunately, in many areas of foreign policy, one gets the impression that our country only does something when big brother has expressly allowed it. But even this big brother has nothing to gain if backwardness triumphs in Afghanistan and a civil war starts there again out of desperation, which is gleefully fueled by neighboring countries from the region and can therefore hardly be stopped.

We will be looking at and possibly promoting botanical programs in Afghanistan that our colleagues have started. First of all, we will look at the bluebell tree, which we presented in our first April newsletter. For us, this is about forestation. Whether the trees then benefit other people, such as beekeepers, ranchers or timber users, will be none of our business. Walnut trees are now being added. An aid organization had brought 210,000 seedlings of walnut trees to Khost before the Taliban took power and then left the country. People are now looking for partners to help them plant at least some of the trees. The seedlings would have to be planted after three years at the latest. OFARIN wants to help prepare the land so that 20,000 trees can be planted in early spring. The preparation work is complex. Each nut tree needs a lot of land.

Our colleagues visited ten districts in Khost and talked to the inhabitants about how they could improve their agriculture. Proposals have been made for generating electricity, damming rivers, and constructing irrigation ditches. We want to have some of that explained to us. But this year we are not going to be active in these other very different areas. We don't understand enough about it. We understand more about teaching. And that should remain our core area. But the reforestation of a province that has been brutally deforested for more than half a century is certainly not wrong.

Best regards

Peter Schwittek.