

Newsletter, 23 DECEMBER 2022

Dear Friends,

It was a good four years ago. OFARIN was visited in Kabul by a ZDF team - a German reporter, a camera man and an Afghan interpreter. At first, the team went to northern Afghanistan, where they flew in a Bundeswehr helicopter. Two weeks later, the journalists were back in Kabul. Now they wanted to see lessons from OFARIN. We had suggested the mosque in Qalachah for this purpose. Early in the morning, the journalists drove up in front of our office in an armored vehicle. Some of our staff went along in a vehicle belonging to OFARIN. That was not armored. I sat in the armored vehicle so that it would not miss the road to Qalachah.

Before I was seated, the ZDF reporter barked venomously at me, "Why are you doing this?" This caught me off guard. I muttered that education was the basis for all development. "But nothing works here. Nothing comes out of it anywhere. What a lot of money is spent here! I think the country should be left to its own devices." I claimed that OFARIN's teaching did have results. The teachers, the students, and even the staff were eager, I said. Everyone enjoyed learning. Then we preferred to keep silent.

What had the journalist experienced so far in Afghanistan that he greeted me so grimly? Was the helicopter to the north not operational and did not fly until two days later, so planned visits had to be cancelled? At least the journalists were able to visit the training project that the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development had recommended to them as being particularly successful. Unfortunately, the project manager had to explain to the team during the welcome that a visit to the training workshops was out of the question. The workshops were located somewhat outside the area. There had been two explosions in the area last week. Even the German trainers were not allowed to go there again yet. And the head of an agricultural project made no secret of the fact that the facilities under construction will only irrigate the fields of the clan of the region's most powerful commander. "Without him, nothing runs here." It had to be such or similar experiences that the reporter was processing.

The visit to Qalachah improved the mood. The reporter saw a mosque full of over 200 learning children, mostly girls. The mullah made sure that the team could still talk to the father of one of the students. You can see this report in our homepage OFARIN.org under "OFARIN in the Heute Journal".

I always think of this story when someone shakes their head and tells me, "Afghanistan. It's a bottomless pit. You shouldn't put more into it. It's all going nowhere." It is true that Afghanistan has not developed as we would like. An enormous amount of money has been poured into it. Blooming landscapes have not emerged. On the contrary, the arch-reactionary Taliban have taken power and are ruining the institutions, the economy and the education system.

But what role does OFARIN play in all this? The people who come to our classes continue to learn to read, write and do math. They gain self-confidence and decision-making skills. They experience solidarity and see that learning is worthwhile, even fun. The teachers, the schoolchildren and their parents see that a lot can be achieved and that much more is possible in their country than many fellow citizens believe.

People who have learned to read, write and calculate can do so as long as they live. Even if OFARIN leaves Afghanistan one day, people will still be walking around for decades with the knowledge and skills they have acquired here. Education has an effect on the individual and on society in a liberal society as well as in a dictatorship. In a dictatorship, it is especially important for people to be able to judge for themselves and to have support in the community of teachers and fellow students. The

Taliban will further ruin the state school system, which was already quite underperforming. Then the graduates of OFARIN's schools will be among the small minority who have at least a decent grasp of basic cultural techniques. When the worst of the Taliban's reign is over, such people will be especially needed for reconstruction.

Can OFARIN continue its teaching? There are huge problems in Punjir province. A lot of people have been cut down there who might be able to resist. Pakistani drones have been used. Many foreigners have occupied our project area in Paryan. Many teachers would like to escape to Kabul. But even there, as Punjiri, they are not safe from the Taliban.

In Kabul and Logar, however, classes are still in session. In the Kabul district of Arsan Qimat, four new classes have been opened with the help of friends who visited us in Kabul.

OFARIN would like to replace the "partnership" with the Ministry of Religious Affairs with one with the Ministry of Education. This change of partners had to be applied for through the Ministry of Economy, where all aid organizations are registered. Our staff managed to do this after months. Now some formalities are still necessary with the administration of the Ministry of Education, whose leadership would like to cooperate with OFARIN. Now the Taliban have decreed anyway that schooling must take place in partnership with the Ministry of Education. So our change of partners should be completed soon. To our teachers, we have paid out part of the salary debt without informing the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This ministry is still our partner. However, it had forbidden us to make such payments until further notice.

Since our teaching is elementary and will remain so in the near future, it is also allowed for girls. However, we have never been able to find out whether the ban on teaching girls from grade 7 is based on the subject matter or on the age of the students.

Overall, we expect the state administration to continue to deteriorate. The unanimous international protests - including from Islamic countries - against the ban on girls and women studying that has just been enacted show that the Taliban, who are currently in charge, are losing all measure. How do you expect to maintain the strict separation of the sexes if female doctors or teachers can no longer be trained?

Banks have been forced to convert to "Islamic banking" for a little while now. Islam forbids the taking of interest. Determining the cost of loans and the reward for deposits via Islamic banking is difficult to impossible. Banks will not make this conversion. Many will collapse. This is likely to destroy any hopes that Afghanistan will get back on its feet economically.

In such situations, people - especially Afghans - find ways out. Money avoids banks. Instead, it flows through the centuries-old hawala system. Interest is taken after all. Lessons for tall girls do take place. The authorities know this, but they do not interfere. Everyone knows that it cannot be done without circumventing the new Taliban laws. Outside Kabul, the development is already further along. There, provincial authorities or local dignitaries make the decisions. For them, the interests of the population are more important than for Kabul ministry officials. But in view of the hair-raising decisions of the Taliban leadership, control by the authorities will also become looser in the capital.

A change of power in the Taliban leadership is a not unrealistic possibility. The disastrous ban on women studying and the disastrous Islamic banking were enforced by the reactionary wing of the Taliban. These people waged war because they saw their identity, religion, and way of life threatened by modern "immoralities." They wanted the rules of coexistence from their mountain village to apply throughout Afghanistan: Strict patriarchy; the honor of the family takes precedence; if necessary, there is blood revenge. Presumably, the majority of Taliban warriors also fought for these goals.

The moderate Taliban leaders have accepted the ban on women studying and Islamic banking "for the sake of peace" for now. The moderates want international cooperation. In return, they are willing to allow non-Pashtuns to share power and to respect women's rights. They promised this to the Americans in the Doha negotiations. They also know that schools and education are important for Afghanistan. They know: Without internal reconciliation, without international cooperation and without its own efforts, Afghanistan has no future.

If the reactionary wing suffers shipwreck with its radical decisions, the moderates will have their chance.

In my opinion, the West could have given the moderate Taliban more influence in the government by making some concessions. After they came to power, Western reporters were treated very obligingly by the Taliban-presumably in the hope that the journalists' home countries would honor that and support Afghanistan in its economic distress. In the process, it would probably have been possible to extract concessions from the Taliban, such as a fairer distribution of power among the ethnic groups and more rights for women. But because the international community did only what was absolutely necessary, the reactionary Taliban remained in control. Their policies alienated the West, which found more and more reasons to distance itself from Afghanistan. Visas for journalists are almost non-existent.

OFARIN has just held a general meeting. It was bitterly cold. Many members were ill. Only seven came. So nothing came of our intention to intensify the active participation of members and other interested parties at the general meeting. We had thought about public relations, but also about the creation of teaching material. The whole thing should take place on the basis of WhatsApp, so that a location-independent collaboration is possible or even a joint work with the Afghan colleagues. Maybe someone from the larger circle of newsletter recipients is interested in participating. Then please call me (0931/708590) or send an e-mail (schwittek@t-online.de)!

Finally, we decided in the One World Circle of Randersacker that we - Anne Marie and I - should report something about OFARIN and Afghanistan. Our Third Mayor Matthias Henneberger, is to moderate the event and prevent us from slipping into professional blindness in front of the auditorium. The event will take place on January 18 in the Schützenhaus in Randersacker. We haven't set the time yet. But if you're there at 7:00, you won't go wrong. Call here at the beginning of the year. Then we will know for sure.

My wife Anne Marie and I wish you a Merry Christmas and all the best in 2023.

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek.