

## Newsletter, March 25, 2022

Dear Friends,

March 21 was Naurus, which means New Year. That was the beginning of the New Year in the Afghan calendar. Afghanistan and Iran have the same calendar. In this calendar, March 21, which is the beginning of the spring, is always the New Year's Day. The year has, as with us, twelve months, which have the names of the zodiac signs in Afghanistan. Year 0 of this calendar is the year of the Hijra, i.e. the move of the Prophet Mohammed and his followers from Mecca to Medina, where the first Islamic state came into being. According to the Christian calendar, this happened in the year 621, so that on March 21, 2022, the year 1401 of the Afghan and Iranian calendar began.

Please do not be too petty with the numbers! The Hijra did not take place properly on January 1, 621, but in the summer of that year. Sometimes it is given for the year 622 AD.

The calendar of most Arab countries differs from the calendar of the Afghans and Iranians. But it too begins with the Hijra. However, the twelve months of the Arab calendar year are based on the moon. They begin and end in each case at the new moon. Since twelve revolutions of the moon around the earth are finished well nine days faster than one revolution of the earth around the sun, we have now the year 1443 in the Arab calendar.

The religious festivals of all Muslims align themselves with the holidays of the Arab calendar. The holy month of Ramadan is also a month of the Arabic calendar.

In pre-Islamic Persia, a spring festival was celebrated at the beginning of spring on March 21. The beginning of the Iranian-Afghan Kalender year was placed on this pre-Islamic holiday. In Iran, the beginning of the new year is celebrated for days. In Afghanistan, too, the New Year is a popular festival. In Kabul, it is celebrated mainly in the Shiite districts. However, the center of Afghan New Year celebrations is Mazar-e-Sharif. There, everyone participates in the New Year celebration. Many people travel to Mazar from all parts of the country. Musicians in particular flock together and give concerts for two weeks.

For the old Taliban - those who ruled Afghanistan until 2001 - the un-Islamic origin of the festival was a bone of contention. They tried to prevent the festival by blocking the access roads to the neighborhoods where people wanted to celebrate. But they did not always keep up such feats of strength and broke off the closures after a few hours. Radical Sunni Islamists such as the supporters of the Islamic State also fought the New Year by carrying out bloody attacks on Shiite festivals and religious services. This year, the desire to celebrate was low due to the catastrophic supply situation, so that the New Year was not the occasion for any special incidents.

My report about timeless certainties like the calendars of the Arabs, Iranians and Afghans already shows you that I don't know much current to say. In Kabul, one waits.

One waits and hopes for major changes for the better. Even the Taliban see that things cannot go on like this. The international community sees that, too. It has the financial means

to help and can set conditions for doing so, and presumably does so. This is the basis of people's hopes for change. But what changes could these be?

Food aid for the populations is certainly necessary. But how do you do it? It takes a lot of organizations with a lot of reliable people to make sure that everyone in Afghanistan gets their portion. At the turn of the year, in a situation that was not nearly as bad, there were many aid organizations, mostly foreign-run, that were able to organize such programs. But now?

First and foremost, the Taliban are completely divided and hardly in a position to make decisions. Certainly there is a lot of pressure from the international community to reopen schools for girls as well. Schoolgirls up to grade six were already going back to school. Now it was a matter of grades 7 to 12. On the second day after the New Year, the new school year began. The night before, it was announced that classes for tall girls would now begin again.

The next morning, the girls standing expectantly in front of the schools were told that they would have to wait a few more months. Many things still had to be sorted out. First and foremost, a school uniform for schoolgirls had to be developed that was compatible with the Sharia laws and the customs of Afghanistan.

This gives an idea of the ideas that haunt the minds of some Taliban chiefs. The course of the farce also shows that positions within the Taliban movement are very contradictory and completely unresolved. Considering that Afghanistan needs help and possible donors insist on teaching schoolgirls, it is very likely that the circumstances of schooling will still change considerably.

In the February newsletter, I reported that our staff had refused to start teaching now. The controversy surrounding the schooling of older girls shows that our colleagues have made the right decision. At first glance, the story hardly seems to concern us, because our teaching is elementary and not aimed at seventh grade students. But it does concern the age of the students, and we also teach adult women. Our partner ministry has rejected any teaching of girls in mosques. It also does not allow classes in private homes. As long as we have to come to terms with these "partners", we have no possibility to teach women or girls. So it makes sense to wait for a change in working conditions, especially since the prospects of that are realistic.

I could imagine that we would start teaching again as soon as the vast majority of our students are allowed to attend. We would start even if small groups - e.g. adult women - are excluded from classes at first and then look for ways and means to free ourselves from such restrictions. Moreover, in the provinces, the official regulations that apply in the capital are likely to be handled much more loosely. But the bulk of our classes are in Kabul, so it is right to be patient.

Finally, on a more positive note, Beheshta is a student of ours whose eye was injured in a fight with her siblings years ago. Saber, her father, brought her to Pakistan at that time, but did not have the money to pay for treatment. Last summer, he was back in Pakistan with his daughter. The ophthalmologist told him that the eye had since been lost and that a prosthesis would have to be inserted. Again, Saber did not have the money and traveled

back to Kabul. Only now he talked to OFARIN about it. We reported about it in the newsletter and a married couple spontaneously agreed to finance the treatment. Further offers of help were received. But in the meantime the border to Pakistan was closed because of Corona and remained so because of the invasion of the Taliban.

Beheshta was cared for in Kabul by Dr. Kamal. He could have performed the operation himself, but advised waiting until treatment was possible in Pakistan, since only inferior prostheses could be obtained in Afghanistan. Dr. Hager, a German ophtalmlogist, offered to provide the necessary material for the operation. We could not make use of this offer, because under the present circumstances the transport was not possible.

In the meantime, Afghans can travel to Pakistan again, provided they manage to get a visa. Saber managed to do this for Beheshta and himself. The treatment of Beheshta could be completed successfully. The prosthesis will probably have to be replaced in a few years when Beheshta is older. The picture shows father and daughter directly after their return to Afghanistan.

Kind regards,

Peter Schwittek.