

Newsletter, January 19, 2024

Dear friends

If you need money in Afghanistan – and we need a lot of money just for planting the nut trees in Khost - you could send it there using the ancient oriental hawala system. It works like this: an Afghan living in Afghanistan wants to buy something in Germany through a business partner living in Germany, e.g. a truck. We transfer an agreed amount to this business partner. The Afghan then pays the same amount to our colleagues in Kabul - minus certain fees. Now the Afghan could have acquired his money through drug trafficking or bribery. This is called money laundering. The Afghan receives a "clean" truck for his "dirty money". Consequently, the transfer by hawala is under the general suspicion of the German authorities. But the Afghan Ministry of Economy has also informed all foreign aid organizations that they are only allowed to use money for their work that has not entered the country via hawala and also no money that travelers, such as Anne Marie and I, have brought with us. So, in order to finance the projects that we have agreed with the Ministry of Economy and a partner ministry, we are only allowed to send money via banks. The Afghan authorities can control that. They know how much money we receive via our bank. We could tell them a lot about the money we bring with us or hawala money.

A bank transfer can look like this: We had sent €50,000 from our account in Germany to our EUR account at Azizi Bank in Kabul in September. In the weeks that followed, we didn't know where the money was. Neither the bank in Germany nor the one in Kabul could provide any information. After weeks, it turned out that the money was in a SWIFT account in Kabul. An intermediary bank wanted to know more details from us and prohibited the payment from the SWIFT account to Azizi Bank. An intermediate bank is an intermediary bank. The money that our bank in Germany sends does not go directly to our bank in Kabul. It goes via various intermediate banks. One of the intermediary banks, a bank in the Italian province, feared that our money would end up with terrorists, i.e. with people on a sanctions list. The intermediary banks face severe penalties if money that passes through them ends up with such people. It took us several attempts to convince the Italians that we were harmless. We succeeded at the end of November. Then I wanted to know whether we could send money this way in the future and sent another €50,000. It worked.

But when our Kabul colleagues wanted to touch the €100,000, the Afghan Ministry of Finance had blocked the accounts of all foreign aid organizations. Checks had shown that money had been embezzled or spent on bribes in many organizations. They now wanted to check all of them. Our colleagues had to submit more and more documents and statements to the ministry for years that went back further and further. Our colleagues complained because they urgently needed the money to pay teachers and provide the classes with stoves and firewood. Above all, the main work for planting the walnut trees in Khost was now taking place. A pit was dug for each of the 33,500 trees. Around 250 men worked on this every day. Then the seedlings had to be bought and planted. The poor devils who carried out this backbreaking work had to be held out with promises. Finally, the officials showed some understanding and released our accounts for a month. During this month we had to submit further documents. If these were not satisfactory, the account would be blocked again.

But when our colleagues presented the positive letter from the bank, the bankers had to tell them that our accounts had been blocked again - now by the Ministry of Economy. They wanted to know which organizations were still active and whether they were carrying out any projects at all. The officials told us about organizations whose foreign employees had fled from the Taliban. The Afghan employees had then plundered the organizations' accounts. Our employees appeared at the ministry every morning at 6 o'clock. After a few days, it was their turn and they were able to show that OFARIN was carrying out projects. Our accounts were released. That happened on January 10.

Now the euro is a rather exotic means of payment in Afghanistan, so the banks only hold small stocks. Our colleagues initially only received €30,000 and now have to audition every week to get as much of the €100,000 as possible.

Our schools were finally supplied with firewood. The teachers were paid their long-overdue salaries. Two very good teachers from Arsan Qimat have been appointed as trainers. Many things are normalizing. However, the problems in Paryan in the Panjir Province, which were mentioned in the DEZ newsletter, continue to exist.

In Afghanistan, there is talk of negotiations taking place within the Taliban leadership regarding the readmission of girls and women to school and university.

Our midwives are pushing ahead with their program. 170 pregnant women are already being cared for. We had not yet registered the program with the Ministry of Health because we were not yet sure whether it met all the conditions that the Ministry places on a midwifery program. However, some of the leading ladies have already worked in such programs approved by the Ministry. They are sure that our program is ready for approval. The local authorities of the inner-city mountain settlement of Schindowal are already demanding that other parts of Schindowal be included. We will present this program to the Ministry of Health.

The constraints of nature required particular interest in the nut tree project. Over 200,000 seedlings were sown three years ago by an aid organization in Khost. The aid organization had fled from the Taliban. There were therefore enough seedlings, but only this winter. Seedlings have to be planted after three years. OFARIN had purchased 33,500 seedlings. They were all planted on January 15. Snow then fell just in time to give the saplings water. From March, they will sprout roots and leaves - hopefully.

Everyone involved must be highly praised for their efforts. The men from the area worked valiantly, although we could only promise them their pay. Our staff in Khost organized the operations in the mountains smoothly. OFARIN's director Naqib Tanai and the head of finance Hewad Khan had to travel to Khost practically every week, despite almost daily negotiations with the ministries in Kabul and the bank, to keep things moving there and to keep the workers happy. The journey from Kabul to Khost takes five hours and leads over two passes at an altitude of almost 3000 meters.

The mountainous project area borders Pakistan. Pakistani militia are camped on the other side of the border, as there are uprisings against the government there. The militiamen were uneasy about the hustle and bustle on the Afghan side. One night they started shooting into

the air. The Afghan border guards negotiated with them. But the Pakistanis insisted that senior officials responsible for the project come to the border to testify that everything was harmless. So Naqib and Hewad had to travel to Khost once again to appease the Pakistanis. The same applies to all contacts with Afghan authorities and the bank. There is a lot that our management staff cannot delegate to other employees. You want to see the faces of the bosses.

In return, these bosses, Naqib and Hewad, were also honored by the provincial authorities. They were each presented with a turban. This high honor shows: The project is making a big impression in the province. Everyone is impressed by its size. Other organizations are amazed at OFARIN's comparatively small investment of personnel and money. Of course, this also means that similar requests are now being made to OFARIN from Khost and the surrounding area.

But let's stay sober! So far, only the main work has been carried out as planned. The program will only be successful when many seedlings have grown into nut trees. That will only become apparent after years. OFARIN will remain responsible for everything for another three years. During this time, the huge area must be maintained. No one is allowed to graze their sheep or goats there. The pits that supply their respective trees with liquid must remain functional. Training events must be held for the local population. These three years will cost OFARIN about as much as the intense months of this fall and winter. After three years, the nut trees may still be small, but they will be so "grown up" that they will live on independently. If only a fraction of the seedlings - say a quarter of them - grow up, that's worth a lot. The officials from the Khost agricultural authority are certain that 95% of the saplings will survive. The work has been done very well.

Something completely different: Claire Behrendt, who is responsible for the administration of OFARIN's finances in Germany, is busy producing donation receipts.

If you are entitled to a donation receipt but have not yet received one by the beginning of February, please write to us! The tax office recognizes deposit slips up to €200 as donation receipts. We therefore do not issue receipts for such donations. However, if someone has lost their deposit slip, they are welcome to contact us.

Kind regards

Peter Schwittek.