

Newsletter, February 23, 2022

Dear Friends,

In Logar province, Ehsanullah is the person in charge of OFARIN's teaching. Ehsanullah had been able to establish a good working relationship for years with the local Taliban who controlled most of our project area in Logar. The Taliban had formed a shadow government for the province and districts. The Talib (Talib is a singular meaning religious student, i.e., prospective mullah; Taliban is the plural of Talib), who was in charge of education in Baraki-e-Barak district, visited OFARIN's classes. He was pleased with our work. A year ago, he asked us through Ehsanullah to create another school class for adult women. Unfortunately, we did not have the money to do so. When we were in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, Ehsanullah was sure that it would be no problem for OFARIN to work even under the Taliban. No question: Ehsanullah was a supporter of the Taliban movement and of OFARIN.

Then, when the Taliban occupied Kabul, it didn't take three days. Then Ehsanullah called me and asked me to get him out of Afghanistan. Puzzled, I asked why. He reported that the Taliban, who had taken power in Logar, were complete strangers. Many Pakistanis and Chechens had come with them, he said. The Taliban, who had been the shadow government, had been booted out everywhere, he said. They didn't know what was happening to them.

I could not arrange for the evacuation of any of my Afghan colleagues. Ehsanullah also remained in his homeland. I was not able to call him either. It was said that he was afraid of getting into trouble because of calls from abroad. Two weeks ago, he called me himself. He was almost bursting with joy. The Taliban personnel in Logar had been completely replaced. The Taliban, who were from the area and with whom he had worked, had taken over the running of the province. The foreigners had disappeared. Some of the graduates of our training program had moved up to senior positions in the province. One even became a department head in a ministry in Kabul.

There are also reports from other provinces of new appointments to leading posts. One cannot deduce from this a realignment of the Taliban leadership. The reasons for such personnel changes are beyond my comprehension. Of course, such changes, if they bring improvements, feed the desire for further changes.

The talks in Doha also stimulate the imagination in the same direction. In Doha, the negotiations that led to the peace agreement between the Taliban and the United States have evolved into talks between the Taliban and the international community. The German ambassador spends more time in Doha than in Kabul. The main issues are to alleviate the famine and, in the medium term, to organize and finance aid for Afghanistan and further cooperation. Personnel issues will certainly be discussed as well.

OFARIN's leadership had made further efforts to arrange with the partner Ministry of Religious Affairs for a resumption of our classes. In fact, on our part, they were willing to start again, as far as that was possible. However, the government had drawn up a paper on the conditions under which aid organizations are allowed to give lessons. Classes must be strictly segregated by gender. Classes in private homes were banned, as were classes for girls in mosques. What remained of OFARIN's program? The fact that the Minister of Religious Affairs had ordered that the Taliban, and not OFARIN, must pay the salaries to the teachers continued to loom large.

OFARIN called a meeting of the trainers from all teaching areas, as we had been doing every two weeks for years. The meeting unanimously decided not to start teaching yet. Now only a new start for a few boys' classes was possible. If we accepted the present conditions, it might be difficult to get

rid of them. The decision testifies to the widespread hope for substantial change among the Taliban leadership.

But the very fact that our people - women and men - sit down together and discuss things in the office, as they used to, is information. Under the "old Taliban," that is, from 1996 to 2001, people in Kabul would not have dared to do that. I went on to ask how things were in other offices or stores open to the public? I was told that hardly anything had changed in the bank since the Taliban took power. In the summer, it was mainly women who sat behind the counters. Now, the number of female and male bank employees is about the same. They work together in one room. Some women have left, presumably because some families were afraid to let their daughters work under the Taliban.

In contrast, the conditions under which our classes are expected to work seem almost out of time. I, too, have been infected by the hope that things will soon change in Afghanistan. A new beginning under the conditions of the ministry did not deserve this name. Our staff made the right decision. Please, do not believe that our trainers want to take a few more weeks of unpaid leave. You would be doing an injustice to our people. They burn for their lessons.

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek.