

Peace Movers in Afghanistan

Calling for Peace

Impressions from our journey.

Despite many warnings, we found the courage to visit Kabul, from May 16 to 23, 2013.

We were:

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Karim Popal, German-Afghan lawyer representing the victims of the air strike on Kundus

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The members of our group have known each other for several years from our joint activities working towards peace and from protests against the deployment of NATO troops in Afghanistan.

We landed in a city of war. Moving freely is not possible, let alone sightseeing. The city has been destroyed by war and is governed by terror. Cars have become the most important means of transport and also form the basis of an ambivalent security; our drivers' circumspection was the most important "guarantee of safety" we had. A very careful and well-supervised excursion out of Kabul to nearby Paghman completed the picture of general insecurity.

Kabul, a city of almost 7 million residents, is a terribly fragmented military fortress, with every public building and every road junction subject to military and police observation. Fear of attacks is everywhere: attacks by the Taliban, military actions (and aggression) by NATO troops, and warlike behaviour or violence by Afghan soldiers and police against their own population, especially against women. A deep feeling of insecurity prevails in a city that was never developed for this number of people. The sanitary facilities, the road system and the water supply are all in a disastrous state; the healthcare system is lamentable; 120,000 beggars roam the streets searching for scraps to survive; refugees desperately try to find a place to stay; the refugee camps are indescribable slums; and youth unemployment runs up to 80% – all of this characterises a very young society. We could not shake off an impression that violence is omnipresent; one sign was the barbed wire everywhere, even on top of traditional courtyard walls encircling old houses.

Our guesthouse presented a strong contrast to this reality. Situated centrally, but secluded and protected in a side street, it offered us our oasis – a place to recuperate and discuss. This was where we experienced the meaning of traditional Afghan hospitality.

The days were full of conversations and discussion. "Fact-finding for peace" was our aim: learning and listening were the primary tasks we had set ourselves.

During our visit we visited the following organisations and institutions:

- Afghan civil society organisations and NGOs
- government representatives

- the Islamic and secular opposition
- representatives of the Taliban
- representatives of various science associations, and
- the ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Afghanistan.

A confirmed conversation with the Afghan President Hamid Karzai could not take place due to the two-day extension of his state visit to India. This state visit was barely granted any attention in the German media but it was immensely significant for future Afghan (security) policy, since military cooperation between the two countries was one of the subjects talked about.

One week is hardly enough to conduct a comprehensive, pluralistic and diverse dialogue with a range of actors from Afghan society. We are aware that we heard and experienced merely a part of the whole; a much longer stay would be necessary to really gain a more complete picture. Our Afghan colleagues (particularly Wahida Kabir and Karim Popal) called on their diverse connections to put together an almost excessive program for us, whereby the conditions of the city, the destruction of the infrastructure and the security situation always had to be taken into account.

In the evenings we were generally exhausted from all of the encounters – full of new information and often emotionally moved or even battered.

We would like to give the reader an overview (in keywords) of the people we met. We list them here in the chronological order we met them in (which was itself really just coincidental).

1. Ansefa Koka, female judge at the highest court in Afghanistan (18.05 12.00)
2. Professors at the Salem University and Council (18.05. 14.30)
3. Afghanistan Islamic Medical Association (18.05. 18.00)
4. Faruq Azam, a cleric with contacts to all sides (mediator) (19.05. 10.00)
5. Conversation with the (scientists') Reform Association (19.05.
6. Association for the Rights of Political Prisoners (19.05. 18.00)
7. National United Front against foreign bases in Afghanistan after 2014 (20.05. 11.30)
8. Solidarity Party (20.05. 13.00)
9. Wahil-Ahmad Mutawakal, former Foreign Minister of the Taliban (20.05. 16.00)
10. Umbrella organisation for the civil society in Afghanistan (20.05. 18.00)
11. Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany (21.05 15.30)
12. Mullah Saeef, Press Spokesman of the Taliban government from 2001 (22.05 11.00)
13. Conversation with Medica Afghanistan (22.05. 12.30)
14. Conversation with Afghanistan Analyst Network
15. Conversation with professors (female and male) at the Shi'ite University
16. Center for Strategic and Regional Studies

We did not write any communiqués following the conversations nor a summary of the discussions, so the following evaluations are only ours. We offer them to prompt discussion and an exchange of opinions.

Men and women in Afghanistan are deeply jaded by the war; in fact, there is an all-consuming weariness of conflict.

This tiredness is due to four main aspects:

1. The permanent sense that their life is dictated by others.
This feeling of heteronomy is triggered by the presence of foreign troops (from

34 countries). Afghans cannot decide for themselves when it comes to their future, the political development and their own lives: it is all decided for them. All significant decisions are taken by the occupying troops and the Afghan government which is dependent upon them. These are the masters in the country. And this fact can be seen and experienced by every Afghan every day.

2. Daily and nightly violence.

This mostly affects civilians. During the day, the attacks come from the Taliban, or as a result of the swaggering brutality of the American troops. During the night, it is the army and state police who terrorise the population, with violence against women forming a particular and permanent part of this. In between, there are the occupying troops and various types of military interventions. None of the conversations were free of reports of NATO troops attacking weddings, schoolchildren, innocent passers-by, farmers etc. There was no-one among our dialogue partners whose family had been spared by the occupiers. The reports of torture and ongoing maltreatment are indescribable.

3. Tiredness regarding the repeated promises made by the occupiers.

And by the governments connected to them. These promises stand in complete contrast to the miserable experience of daily life in the country. Even the minimal improvements experienced in areas such as women's rights and education (at least in Kabul) did not escape critical scrutiny: Can this really be the result of 12 years of war and expenditure of over US\$400 billion? The disastrous state of the country is reflected in the Human Development Index published by the UN in March 2013, based on data from 2005 to 2012. Of 187 countries analysed, Afghanistan can be found at 175th place and it is even more revealing to notice that the country slipped three places since the last HDI report. Think of the promises made to this country: the "Switzerland of Asia", water, schools, investment... . Listening to these lies makes one tired, but also extremely angry.

4. Inconceivable levels of corruption.

Corruption has always been found here, as in many countries in the world. And now there is a type of "institutional corruption", where institutions are corrupted from the top down (with billions of dollars of taxpayers' money from NATO countries) and the institutions then corrupt those who deal with them and so on, until everyone has secured their own "baksheesh". The "head of the fish" which begins to rot first here is NATO – and more specifically, the USA. According to the New York Times, the war criminal Dostum receives 100,000 US dollars per month from the CIA. The CIA has been delivering suitcases full of money to the presidential palace for years. A full list of examples would be many pages long, right down to the police officers who only let cars continue driving if there was a banknote included in the documents they check. It would also include members of Parliament (both male and female) who vote according to the wishes of the highest bidder.

Women continue to suffer particularly from the conditions in the country. Often considered "fair game", they are subject to an unimaginably high incidence of rape, within the family and outside. To compound this, rape victims are then accused of "moral crimes" (see, for example, the current report from Human Rights Watch). And the way they are treated in prison is particularly demeaning. If women's rights were in any way supposed to be part of the reason for the intervention here, then after 12 years we can say that NATO has completely failed.

Although the population is jaded, there are also signs of increased political activity and thought. People are not just complaining and cursing: they are discussing – even philosophising – about possible solutions and ways forward. And not just on the fringes, but as part of mainstream conversations. With the decisive year 2014 just around the corner, these debates seem to be taking on a new dimension. Of course, all of our observations apply only to Kabul: it could be quite different in the provinces.

Many are convinced there is now a “window of opportunity”: even if they do not always agree how wide open the window is and how long it will remain open.

So what are the key points to be included in shaping a solution that could lead to peace in the country? (To put it more cautiously: What do we see as the key points...?)

The solution has to be an Afghan solution. This is absolutely essential and none of our Afghan dialogue partners questioned this. This point has prerequisites and conditions, as well as political consequences. Our conversation partners repeatedly reminded us of their country's 4000-year history, in which occupations failed over and over again.

- a. The condition: all of the relevant Afghan political powers have to come together again, develop a joint programme for peace, and form a government of national unity as a transition (or transformation) government. This includes the current government, the Islamic circles who are currently in opposition, including the forces around Hekmatja (who is actually in the government), the Taliban and civil society groups from the Islamic sciences. We are talking about an "Islamic coalition": as far as these political considerations are concerned, the very small secular opposition hardly plays a role. Although there is a political left wing, it is splintered and far from being a political force in the country. The country has yet to fully come to terms with the history of their political actions in connection with the coup and takeover of the government in 1978. That period of government was also characterised by dictatorship and political terror. Changes in a country, as positive as they may be, cannot be implemented without or against the will of that country's people. Secular powers, including the left-wing and religions other than Islam, need to be granted rights as recognised democratic minorities. This national coalition does seem possible even if it would be very complicated. Today we can already see a range of forms of cooperation – within the “national front”, for example. A repeat of the war of 1992 appears to be impossible; 30 years of war have left deep scars on everybody. In fact, the possibility of renewed civil war is being played up for propaganda purposes by NATO, the warlords and some international NGOs in order to legitimate their existence. And the supposed threat of disintegration of the country along ethnic and tribal lines is more an imported problem than an Afghan one today; the situation is quite possibly different than it was in the 90s. It also remains to be questioned whether it is really clever to write the tribal membership of the president and vice president into the constitution. Elections that are reasonably fair and free will only be conceivable after a certain transformation period. Currently prevailing conditions mean that new elections would be subject to corruption and war and would end just as disastrously as the last two.
- b. Another prerequisite for an agreement such as this (transitional government and process of transformation) is the recognition of women's and human rights. All of the parties involved are actually ready to do this,

including the Taliban and other Islamic powers. Representatives of the Taliban who we talked to phrase this in a very historically self-critical way; they have obviously learned a few lessons during the last 12 years. They have also put this into action: in areas where they have political supremacy, they are already financing their first girls' schools and even a university with women students. Although there are still many contradictions, clearly positive movement is visible.

- c. Any policy program from a "national unity government" has to include one unavoidable point, which our conversation partners emphasised more than any other: education for girls and boys, including at university. The rate of illiteracy is still 80%. In other aspects, the policy program can only be one that attempts to solve the irresolvable by working towards a national (decentralised) economy, ecological measures and food sovereignty – by (re-)stimulating the agricultural sector. Education and training for all is perhaps the greatest challenge: to put it bluntly, ignorance is the biggest obstacle to any development.

A process of reconciliation will be an indispensable part of this but will take time and not be simple: victims and perpetrators are often not easily distinguishable; "good and evil" do not exist here as a clear pair of opposites.

Prerequisite and sine qua non condition for the opening up of a path to peace is the *complete withdrawal of all foreign troops*. All of the members of the opposition to whom we spoke want and demand this withdrawal. Even the Karzai government is beginning to understand that a peace process is hardly conceivable without this troop withdrawal. Following an intensive discussion, a "fatwa" was published setting out this goal.

NATO and its respective governments are the main obstacle to peace – even after 2014, since NATO's intention is not to withdraw all its troops but rather to reduce their numbers.

However, the situation is actually a clear case of "either-or": Either the intervention troops withdraw, making an Afghan solution possible, or the war continues. The overwhelming attitude among the people (as far as they reveal their feelings) and the debates and positions being taken within Afghan society all lend support to this demand: in fact, it is probably reasonable to claim, "it is common sense". Afghan people are weary of their lives being determined by others. The system was forced upon them, unrequested, from outside and does not take into account their traditions and experiences. So it is widely met by rejection. Mistrust is widespread (and justified) when it comes to agreements not being upheld and promises not being met. (Chancellor Kohl's "blooming landscapes" promise to East Germans in 1990 was only a minor blooper in comparison.) This mistrust shapes the basic conviction that the only possible solution is an Afghan solution decided by Afghans.

We can see that the type of worries which find their most extreme expression as, "But that could lead to civil war!" is not actually the type of worries bothering the population. Instead, they can be seen to be arguments used by NATO, warlords (can anyone really believe that these billionaires with bank accounts in Dubai/Qatar will really return to the mountains and fight?) and even some international NGOs profiting from the current situation. The population itself is more worried about the war that is being fought out now, every day, and is looking for an alternative to the current heteronomy.

The real danger is different: If a total withdrawal does not occur, then there will very likely be an uprising among the population against the occupiers – bloody, chaotic

and cruel. We heard a range of different opinions as to whether this situation really is close or not. Put pointedly, the existence of NATO troops in this country is driving it into continued and escalatory conflicts. Again and again we heard the claim: NATO is strengthening the war criminals.

The path to peace can definitely only be opened up if the intervention forces are withdrawn. Transition scenarios involving the deployment of more independent blue berets from Islamic countries (according to Chapter 6) are in discussion and could be a positive (psychological) influence for the peace process.

Any peace process has to be embedded in a regional solution: The range of very different –even opposing – interests of neighbouring countries needs to be integrated into a process comparable to the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe in the 1970s. Compensation and cooperation should be the focus of the discussions; the process will certainly not be easy, but it cannot be side-stepped. Here the UN could play a positive role shaping the talks.

The first step in the peace process could (in fact, after 30 years of war, *must*) be a cease-fire!

One problem faced by any future peace process is the fact that those who are jointly responsible for the situation in the last 20 years are the same people who are now supposed to lead Afghanistan into peace. Unfortunately there are as yet no signs of handing over to the new generation (who shape the country today in so many other ways) or to the women (who carry the most severe burdens of war). This is made even more difficult due to the traditional value placed in respecting society's elders. An "Afghan Spring" still seems a long way away. There is an Afghan civil society beyond the international NGOs. It is coordinated and networked to some extent, with its presence felt in many fields, such as education, science, medicine and women's issues, as well as a little peace work. The Federation of Afghanistan Civil Society plays an important role in this regard.

The day after we arrived back home there was a military attack less than 500m from our quarters and a bombing with more than 10 deaths, It could hardly be more clear how important it is for us to do everything we can for peace.

NATO and Western governments are finally taking notice of the controversy around the future of Afghanistan. But the situation is assessed differently. Resistance against the policy of using drones ("targeted killing") is growing, not only among the population but also among politicians. It is more than doubtful whether France, Canada and the Netherlands will continue to deploy troops to the country. The controversy is now so deep that the NATO Summit scheduled for mid-June had to be postponed indefinitely. The Karzai government is trying to broaden its room for manoeuvre, for example by intensifying its cooperation with India and by documenting its increased self-reliance. Germany, however, is leading the way when it comes to the continuation of the occupation: Defence Minister de Maizière's declaration that Germany will remain with 600-800 troops is the first of any of the deploying countries. The USA are negotiating with President Karzai about 9-12 military bases. So we can see the basic claim made by our protest actions at Petersberg 2 remains correct: "They are talking peace but waging war!"

Foreign aid towards peaceful development, which might then really deserve the name "construction", needs to be continued in a decentralised and project-oriented manner. There are many examples of real and positive assistance, but the question nonetheless remains: What happened to the billions, even hundreds of billions, which

were supposed to flow into “civil” Afghanistan? Unfortunately, part of the answer is that they strengthened the warlords, encouraged corruption and the drug trade, ruined the prices on the accommodation market and nourished an excessive administration and control system run by international NGOs. Different principles need to determine what happens: Afghans should decide what they need; it should be about helping them to help themselves and not about creating economic opportunities for the North. Less is often more – especially where project funding for Afghanistan is concerned.

Our task remains this: Continuing our intensive public delegitimation of the deployment of the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan, making it clear that this is a military aggression that contravenes international law. And continuing our attempts to secure peace.

“Bring the troops home” is the appeal for the international peace movement – it needs to be heard more loudly in Germany, too.

Berlin, May 26, 2013
Reiner Braun and Kristine Karch

See photos at:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/95853500@N06/sets/72157633746043592/>

Or

<http://www.afghanistanprotest.de/home/>