



From the Editor

My rather sobering review of OPAWC's financial situation at its Vocational Training Centre in the last SAWAN was not intended as a plea for help, but several of our supporters read it as such and made extraordinary donations. Our most sincere and heartfelt thanks go out to them. If you who reads this SAWAN are one of them, you can feel proud to be in the hearts of the women at the Centre as a sister or brother living in a country so far away yet so close in friendship.

Matthias Tomczak

Historic peace march arrives in Kabul

Three months ago a group of eight young men decided to walk 700 km from Helmand to Kabul to demand peace for their country. Their *March for Peace* began on 12 May and ended at the Abdul Rahman Mosque in Kabul. The following report on the march was published by CNN when the group arrived in Kabul on 18 June.

Abdul Manai Hamdard, from the Gereshk district of Helmand province, says he never expected the march to take as long as it did. "When I left Helmand I only took a few clothes and very little money. I thought we'd be in Kabul in 10 or 12 days."

Instead, the journey saw the 27-year-old trek across six provinces crisscrossing between government- and Taliban-controlled areas. As the journey continued, their numbers swelled, from the eight youth who began the march on May 12, to more than 65 by the time they reached Kabul.

Along the way, they were greeted by eager locals, all of whom were more than willing to support them in their mission.

"We would arrive somewhere and suddenly we would be invited into people's homes and into their mosques. They listened to what we had to say, and we listened to them telling us about the condition of their lives where they are," says Hamdard, who joined the trek early on.

Hamdard estimates that in those 38 days he spoke to more than 100,000 people. "What's most important is that every single one of them supported us."

The group's demands boil down to four basic points: a ceasefire between the Taliban and government forces, peace talks between the two sides, the implementation of a law agreed upon by the government and the Taliban, and the withdrawal of foreign forces.

The peace marchers arrived in Kabul just as an unprecedented three-day ceasefire between the government and Taliban forces came to an end at the conclusion of the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

Hamdard points to that ceasefire -- which saw at least 30,000 Taliban fighters enter the cities and provinces of Afghanistan to take part in customary Eid prayers and revel in the three-day celebrations

alongside government officials and members of the Afghan National Security Forces -- as a sign of what a movement like theirs could achieve. It was, he says, why he was able to carry on with the journey in heat of 30 degrees while fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

"I never imagined I would see a sight like that in my country, but that's what our movement is about, that's why I started this journey," he says, referring to pictures and video showing Taliban and Afghan security forces hugging and men and women stopping to take pictures with Taliban fighters holding the group's white flag in their hands.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/18/asia/afghanistan-peace-march-intl/>

Women's rights activists and civil society leaders call for justice in Afghanistan

At an event hosted by top UN officials, prominent women's rights activists and civil society leaders spoke out against Afghanistan's traditional mediation practices, stressing that serious crimes against women and girls continue to go unpunished in the country's justice system, despite longstanding legal mechanisms set up to address them.

A new report, *'Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women'*, documents the individual experiences of Afghan women, survivors of violence across the country, between August 2015 and December 2017, and identifies the human rights implications of the widespread use of mediation in cases of violence against women. The report

describes how mediation deprives women of access to justice and hinders the realization of their fundamental rights.

The 16 activists and civil society leaders who had gathered for the event discussed what they called a disturbing pattern of unpunished violence against women and girls in Afghanistan, and described the situation as worsening in some regions. "In the north, there are a growing number of warlords committing rape and abduction, and then influencing the legal system to avoid prosecution," said one of the activists.

The formal Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) Law, which came into force in 2009, led to EVAW prosecutors being put in place in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, with special EVAW courts established in key urban centers. Despite these developments, significant gaps remain in enabling women to access legal remedies when faced with violence. UNAMA's new report, released on 29 May, notes that the existing legal



One of several murals painted in Kabul to greet the peace marchers

framework and court adjudication processes in Afghanistan do provide options for women facing violence. However, it emphasises that mediation cannot replace the judicial protections provided to women by the constitution and laws of Afghanistan.

"The use of mediation in criminal cases serves not only to normalise violence against women but also to undermine confidence in the criminal justice system as a whole," said UN representative Yamamoto in a statement launching the report.

Problems with Iran over water rights

Afghanistan and Iran have three trans-boundary rivers between them – Helmand, Harirod and Farahrod, which originate deep inside Afghanistan.

On March 13, 1973, the Helmand River Treaty was signed between then Afghan prime minister Mohammad Mousa Shafiq and then Iranian prime minister Amir-Abbas Hoveyda.

The treaty contains 12 articles and two attached protocols, which include the legal conditions, the water situation proportional to the rainfall, the use of water sensors and Iran's share, as well as the rights and obligations of both sides.

A total of 26 cubic metres per second was allocated for Iran. The flow of Helmand River to Iran is conditional on the annual state of water, climate conditions and rainfall.

While Afghanistan was engaged in fighting the Soviet Red Army, Iran built a number of dams and installed water pumps that have never been agreed upon by the Afghan side. For nearly 45 years since the water treaty had been signed, Iran has been getting up to three times more water from the Helmand River than it is allowed.

Now Iran is demanding to make this situation permanent and warns of reciprocity should Afghanistan continue to disregard its demands. President Hassan Rouhani says that "reciprocating measures" could mean expulsion of refugees or more support to armed groups. He says that in lieu of threats, Iran should use the established mechanisms, included in the provision of the agreement, to resolve the disputed issues. A successful implementation of any agreement requires both sides to fully adhere to the terms of their agreements.

Water management is an essential element of Afghanistan's strategy for its economic development. The country cannot afford to witness nearly 70 per cent of its waters flowing into neighbouring countries while suffering economically by importing three-quarters of its electricity as well as a significant portion of its foodstuff needs from its neighbours.

A statement of the Afghan government says: "We call on Tehran to respect and honour the terms of the treaty and to stop the blame game on others for their own failed water management strategies. Iran should replace its asymmetric economic policies with a symmetric economic relationship with Afghanistan, for the wellbeing of both our nations."

<https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/afghanistan-will-never-succumb-to-the-bullying-and-scare-tactics-of-tehran-1.735017>

More air strikes, more civilian deaths

The number of civilians killed from airstrikes of US and other foreign forces is much higher than stated in official reports of US authorities.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 42 civilian airstrike victims and witnesses in Nangarhar, Herat, and Kabul provinces between November 2017 and April 2018. It found that the Afghan government has developed almost no capacity to investigate civilian casualties arising from its military operations. At the same time, US forces have downsized their civilian casualties tracking mechanisms and never conduct on-site investigations after attacks resulting in civilian

casualties, relying instead on visual and satellite imagery and unreliable Afghan security force reports.

As an example of the interviews with airstrike victims 17 year old Rozina described an event that occurred a year ago: On August 10, 2017, a private vehicle traveling in Haska Mena district sustained serious damage, resulting in the death of at least nine people and one severely injured person. Rozina, who is the sole survivor, told Human Rights Watch that she and her family were fleeing the area because troop movements indicated that military operations were imminent:

"We expected that Afghan or US forces would bomb by the next day. We drove for a few minutes and I saw a plane in the sky. There was a noise and I fell unconscious. When I woke, my father and brothers were dead. My aunt and cousins were injured and screaming, but I was hurt and couldn't move. They died because no one came to help. I was there for hours before someone came."



The vehicle in which nine civilians were killed on 10 August 2017, with women and children on the open loading platform.

The next day, August 11, a Resolute Support spokesperson stated that US military forces had destroyed a vehicle "loaded with militants and munitions," and that "the strike was conducted in the middle of open terrain. There was zero chance of civilian casualties."

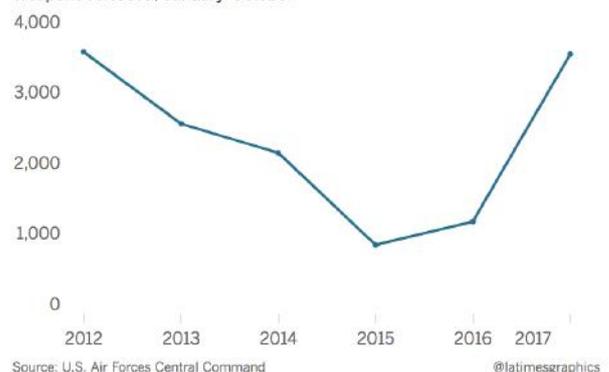
The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has reported that civilian casualties from US and Afghan airstrikes have increased since 2016 as air operations in Afghanistan have increased. In 2017, UNAMA documented 631 civilian casualties (295 deaths and 336 injuries) from 139 aerial operations conducted by Afghan government and US forces – a seven per cent increase over 2016, and the highest yearly total of civilian casualties from airstrikes since systematic documentation began in 2009.

Original article in the Los Angeles Times

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/16/afghanistan-weak-investigations-civilian-airstrike-deaths>

U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan

Weapons released, January-October





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www.nsw.sawa-australia.org; Facebook *Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan SAWA -NSW.*

PROFILES OF THE WOMEN ENROLLED IN OUR PROJECT

These profiles were sent to us by OPAWC recently. We hope you will agree that the work involved in funding our project is really worthwhile. These stories make very moving reading.

Zala, aged 14 joined the project in 2017 and writes:

"I was always eager to learn English as I have been watching other girls in our neighbourhood getting job and were respected by their families. I wished I could get English class at one of the courses near to our village but it was too hard for me to travel and expensive for my family to afford. I was also very interested in learning computer. We had a computer class in our school but it didn't function well. Most of the computers were broken and we often didn't have the power to run computers. I happened to know about OPAWC's English and computer classes from a friend of mine who was studying in this



center. Here, I find a new world for me because all my wishes turned into reality, the environment is very friendly and I feel very much secure to study here. In addition to this, I came to know amazing staff who are all good women's advocates and I learnt so much from them. Now all my friends and even our principal know that I learnt computer programs, they even encourage me to become the computer teacher at our school one day."

Rashida, aged 15 who joined the project at the same time writes.

"As you might know we live in a world completely different from you. I can't describe how I felt when I came here and saw all these girls coming together in this beautiful center and studying. I was very encouraged to come here by any cost. It took me months to convince my family to let me walk all this distance, which is risky, and learn computer and English. I will try to encourage other girls of my tribe to do the same and hopefully they could make it happen."

The Coordinator at OPAWC explained further. Rashida lives 5 km away from OPAWC's center at a remote area on mountains and she comes all along the way walking and hiking on rough tracks every day to the center. She belongs to a conservative nomad



tribe with no one in the family has ever attended school. For me and her family, this is a turning point in their life where one of their girls gets the chance to attend literacy classes as well computer and English classes. Rashida is now one of our active students, she is regular in her attendance and shows keen interest in class.

She plans to collect money and buy a laptop to take it to her village.

The Centre, in Nangarhar Province, is expanding its literacy and craft classes in the near future. This will lead to increased expenses above the \$19,000 we have been able to send them for the past year. Hopefully, with your help we will be able to raise more for such a good cause.

COMING EVENTS

FILM: The Patience Stone :Saturday, 18th August 2018 5.00 p.m. for 5.30 p.m. start, at the Hannaford Centre, 608 Darling Street, Rozelle, cnr Nelson Street. Entry by donation (suggested \$20) includes light refreshments prior to the film. This is an Afghan-French film about a woman's life in Afghanistan. RSVP for catering: Shirley on 0412 438 110 or email: info.nsw.sawa-australia.org.

AGM: 6.30pm Tuesday, 18th September at the Uniting Church, 344 Darling St Balmain.



The farmlands near OPAWC's English and Computer Center. This center is the first resource center for women and girls in the area. e are told the community welcomed the program with open hearts.