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Foreword

Margaret Mead, the anthropologist said that to understand 'others' we have to understand them from the others' point of view - not our own point of view. We have to leave our preconceived notions, myths, stereotypes and biases behind and understand others with an open heart and mind, without judging them for what they are and most importantly, what they are not.

The main objective of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's project 'Afghanistan-Pakistan Journalists Exchange Programme - Understanding the Neighbour' was to break the stereotypes and bring together young journalists from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

It was a two-phase project. The first phase was held in Pakistan in June, 2012 and the second in October, 2012 in Afghanistan. 22 journalists were selected from Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the end of each phase of the programme, these journalists wrote reports focusing on issues that are of interest to both Pakistan and Afghanistan. In Pakistan, they were paired in groups of two (one Afghan and one Pakistani) and produced 11 reports. In Kabul, they did individual reporting as well. Their reports were published in The Express Tribune and The News in Pakistan and in The Afghanistan Times in Kabul.

The selected articles and blogs included in this booklet were written during and after the fellowship programme. A blog was also created by the journalists during the first part of the programme which can be accessed online at www.understandingtheneighbourwordpress.com, where other blogs can be accessed as well.

All of us who were part of this fellowship have many wonderful stories to share. This project was successful with the cooperation and support of our dear friends and partners. I would like to thank Dr. Shahjahan Syed, University of the Peshawar, M. Ziauddin, The Express Tribune, Irfan Ali, Mohammad Shafiq, Mediothek-Peshawar and Robin Fernandez.

FES-Afghanistan and Pakistan offices had impressive collaboration in making this program a great success. Therefore, I would like to extend heartfelt thanks to FES-Afghanistan for their cooperation and support in the programme. Adrienne, Arzoo, Cem and Atif thanks for showing us the real Kabul!

I would like to pay our special gratitude to Shoukat Ali and Sadia Farooq of FES-Pakistan for their assistance throughout the project and making it a success story to share. This programme was not possible without the facilitation of Anja Minnaert (Resident Representative-FES Pakistan 2010-2012) in phase-1 and Philipp Kauppert (current Resident Director) in phase-2.

FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG
Qurratulain (Annie) Zaman
Islamabad. Feb, 2013
Afghanistan emerges as new job market for Pakistanis

By Delawar Jan

KABUL: Afghanistan is emerging an unlikely new job market for Pakistanis as the number of the youth who are employed in the war-torn country crossed 100,000, officials here say.

“Around 100,000 Pakistanis are working in Afghanistan as chartered accountants, bankers, teachers, engineers, doctors and labourers,” said Muhammad Sadiq, Pakistan’s ambassador to Afghanistan. He said the Pakistani workers were preferred for hiring because of their skills and experience. He revealed that $2.6 billion official exports to the country, which makes it the biggest exporter to Afghanistan, had created 3.5 million jobs in Pakistan.

The Pakistanis who work in Kabul suggested that the number of the workers in Afghanistan was well over 100,000. “The ambassador might be talking of the workers having official record. I think a good number of unregistered Pakistanis have also been working in Afghanistan which is in addition to the 100,000,” said Afzal Ahmad, manager at a food company.

The Pakistanis said they had taken up jobs in the war-struck country due to the saturated job market in Pakistan. Many of those interviewed said handsome salaries in Afghanistan had enticed them to seek job in the country that has been a theatre of a long war.

However, the number of Afghans who have been getting economic benefits from Pakistan dwarfs the total of Pakistani workers in Afghanistan. Muhammad Sadiq said 56,000 Afghans crossed into Pakistan every day for different needs including jobs. Around three million refugees who have jobs or businesses aren’t part of this count.

Daud Badshah, a resident of Shergarh in Mardan district, said he was underpaid in Pakistan. “A measly Rs 4,000 salary was offered to me by NHA which was insufficient for the needs of my family,” said Sher Badshah, whose father is a watchman at a factory in Shergarh.

The 26-year-old man, who could study only up to 9th class, works for 14 hours daily (7am-9pm) at a restaurant in Kabul where he supervises a staff of 35 people and is able to make good money. “I am getting Rs 16,380 (Af.9,000), plus the tip,” he said. “My family tried to stop me from taking up the job in Afghanistan but my poor economic conditions forced me to come here. Four years later, the pressure continues,” he added.

Sher Badshah’s job encouraged his brother Sardar Badshah to come to Afghanistan in search of a job. Now, he gets a salary of 500 US dollars as a cook.”Afghan police harass us despite the fact that we have visas. They demand bribe and misbehave with us. But people here are nice and respectful,” he said.

At the same restaurant, Muhammad Ayaz from Peshawar and Muhammad Ali from Skardu receive salary of Rs 23,660 (Af.13,000) and Rs 30,940 (Af.17,000), respectively.

Waqar Ahmad came from Peshawar to Kabul in 2007 to find a job. Now he is holding an executive position in a company for the last almost six years and gets an undisclosed
Afghan journalists find Pakistan friendly

By Delawar Jan

PESHAWAR: When Malik Faisal Moonzajer set out on a visit to Islamabad mid-June this year from Afghanistan, one thing whirled in his mind: Pakistan is an enemy. So deep-seated was this abhorrence that for decades he had taken everything anyone said positive about this country with a pinch of salt. Unbearable for him was anyone admiring Pakistan.

Just a couple of days before he flew to Islamabad, a Pakistani professor in a pre-departure orientation said “Pakistan is not a bad country.” On this, he confronted him: “You must be an [ISI] agent.” Moonzajer believed the professor had lied.

However, just after nine days stay in Pakistan, he realised his hate was misplaced. He reproduced the professor’s words, “Pakistan is a good country.” His (mis)perceptions were smashed to pieces after he travelled in the country and interacted with the people. “I was born to hate Pakistanis,” he said of his ingrained hatred for this country. “One thing was clearly known to me that Pakistan was an enemy. I had nothing more [in my mind] than that.”

Another man who was won over was Rafiullah, a Pashto-speaking journalist from northern Kunduz province. or at least will meet us withersen faces. But I found them that open-hearted, friendly, hospitable and respectful” he said. “It shames me when I think that I had thought so negatively about Pakistanis,” he regretted.

What contributed to changing their opinion about Pakistan? “Interaction with Pakistanis,” says Moonzajer, who comes from northern Afghanistan’s Sar-e Pol province where non-Pashuns constitute the majority and anti-Pakistan sentiments run high. The first interaction he had was with Pakistan’s ambassador to Kabul. “The answers he offered to our questions were reasonable. [That was the point from where] I started thinking that Pakistan might not be an enemy,” he added.

Moonzajer was one of a group of journalists that visited Pakistan as part of an exchange programme initiated by a German organisation, Friedrich- Ebert-Stiftung.

“[Then] I met some Pakistani counterparts and [discovered] they were not against Afghans,” he added. On the streets, he was amazed by people’s cooperation. He went to markets alone to learn more about Pakistan without being accompanied by anyone. “I met a taxi driver, who helped me show places without asking for anything,” he added.

Moonzajer noted that a taxi driver in Afghanistan would have grimaced in disgust if you had to tell him that you were a Pakistani. “Some people held my camera and patiently followed me for an hour to take my pictures at Faisal Mosque,” he tells of his experiences.

The programme, titled “Understanding the neighbour,” appeared to have lived up to its expectations and helped almost all the visiting Afghan journalists understand the neighbouring Pakistan. Bravo!

The Afghan journalists travelled in Murree hills to go to University of Peshawar summer campus at Bara Gali. They loved seeing the forested mountains and scenic sights. They also stayed in Islamabad for some days and worked with Pakistani counterparts on stories. Pakistani journalists are visiting Kabul in October.

So fascinated is 23-year-old Moonzajer that now he plans to pursue a master’s degree in an Islamabad university. “What I have learnt [here] is quite opposite to what I had in my mind,” said Moonzajer, wearing glasses and a light stubble, just before leaving hotel for the airport on his return journey to Kabul.

The interaction with people and media made a positive impression on Farkhunda, a radio reporter from Mazar-i-Sharif, capital of Balkh province. “My perception of Pakistan has changed by 180 degree,” she said.

Muhammad Atif, who works in Kabul, said good discussions with Pakistanis caused them to stop thinking negatively about them.

Ayesha Hasan, a Pakistani journalist, wrote in her blog that the Afghan journalists broke several of the stereotypes one-by-one. She thought the Afghans were rigid, serious and the ones who rarely laughed. But she found some of them the funniest. She was also amazed to see no rebel in a generation that grew up in war, something opposite to the perception.

However, cross-border raids and Pakistani militants’ unmolested sanctuaries in Afghanistan and Haqqani network’s alleged safe havens in the tribal areas hobble efforts for normalisation of bilateral relations. But new found friends like Moonzajer are determined to work for mutual understanding. Thousands others, he said, still held negative opinion about Pakistan and he had to change it.

“When I will go back I will tell people please, please listen to me...and at first they might not listen to me...that there are truths that we should know,” he said. “I have to tell people my stories. I have to write several articles. Maybe they will call me ISI agent, but I have to change it,” Moonzajer vowed.
Karzai govt, NATO downplay
Fazlullah’s presence in Afghanistan
By Delawar Jan

KABUL: The Karzai administration and NATO here hardly give any sign of launching operation against Maulana Fazlullah as his group again came under focus after the recent attack on Malala Yousafzai.

In fact, Afghanistan is in a state of denial about the presence of Fazlullah, a Pakistani Taliban commander who was driven out of Swat Valley in a massive military operation in mid-2009. “We want to assure the Pakistani people that we will not allow any terrorist to use Afghan soil,” said Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry spokesman, Sediq Sediqi, indicating that no “terrorist” was attacking Pakistan from Afghanistan.

Maulana Fazlullah, Pakistani officials say, has been maintaining sanctuaries in Afghanistan’s Kunar province for the last few years. His group has organised deadly cross-border raids into Upper Dir, Chitral and Lower Dir districts and has claimed responsibility for suicide bombings and targeted attacks against opponents.

Malala Yousafzai, who spoke against his brutalities in Swat, is believed to have been targeted on his behalf and the alleged perpetrator, Attaullah, has reportedly moved to safe havens in Kunar.

When Sediqi was confronted that Fazlullah had been operating from Kunar for the last three years, he said: “Well, there are terrorists living on the Pakistani soil for many, many years.” His answer suggested the Afghanistan government had no intention to move against Fazlullah.

A similar answer came from Foreign Ministry spokesman, Janan Mosazai. “Any comparison between the vast system of sanctuaries, training camps, support system, financial support and the strategic advice that Taliban and other elements receive from Pakistan with a few anti-Pakistan Taliban that might be in Kunar or Nuristan is completely against the fact, unfair, unjust and a statement against the reality in this region,” he said.

Pakistan says governor of Kunar and elements of the Afghan intelligence agencies have been providing support to Maulana Fazlullah. “I don’t think it’s the policy of the Afghan government but there are people in the Afghan government, in the Afghan set-up who do support him because without their total support it will not be possible for the TTP people to move so freely there,” said Muhammad Sadiq, Pakistan’s ambassador to Afghanistan.

“The governor of Kunar has actually declared jihad against Pakistan Army. So that could be on their loose top. But the fact is when the governor of a province says something like this, we expect the Kabul government that there will be some action against that governor,” he told The News in an interview.

“It’s very clear that they are here. We have confirmed reports that people who raid Pakistan and who get wounded are brought back here and we know the places where they are treated,” he said.

He said the issue had been raised with Afghan government and Isaf headquarters here but both had taken the position that they did not have the capacity to go into Kunar and address this problem.

Dominic Medley, a NATO spokesman in Afghanistan, said they knew “insurgents and terrorists” were moving freely across the border but Afghanistan and Pakistan should fight this “shared fight” together.

“Between Afghanistan and Pakistan and NATO there are regular meetings, diplomacy continues, the tripartite commission, there is coordination at the border—all that must continue to ensure that the security between the two countries is tackled by both countries,” he said in an interview with The News.

He said the UN mandate to NATO to fight terrorists up to the border of Afghanistan was recently renewed. However, when asked why the alliance failed to take action against Fazlullah who has built sanctuaries within the border of Afghanistan, he failed to answer the question. “I don’t know about that particular group. I am sorry. I can’t give an answer on that group. It’s too specific for me to know about that group,” he said.

It was learnt that the US and NATO would have to shift 40 percent of their military assets to eastern Afghanistan to fight Fazlullah and other militants. Therefore, they are not willing to take action against him. The unwillingness and inability of Afghanistan and US and NATO to act against Fazlullah gives him freedom to organise attacks on the border and inside the country, posting serious security threat to Pakistan.

Faheem Dashti, a senior Afghan journalist, said the US had failed in defeating Taliban but succeeded in building security forces for Afghanistan. He said the Afghanistan government and the security forces were too weak to take action against Fazlullah.

Sediqi said Afghanistan considered Fazlullah a terrorist but any action that would be taken against him would be “based on the international rules and regulations.”

The Afghans are complaining about cross-border shelling. “So far more than ten people have been killed and many, many houses destroyed and animals killed and thousands of people displaced because of these rockets,” Sediqi said. He said the reason Pakistan was providing was a weak one. “That means that the Afghan Army should also fire rockets on the other side because all the terrorists are stationed on the other side of the border,” he said.

Janan Mosazai demanded a complete halt to shelling. “The solution is that they (Pakistan) stop it immediately and completely,” he said. Ambassador Sadiq admitted shells had landed in Afghanistan but no or little casualties had been caused.

Delawar Jan is a staff reporter at The News, Peshawar, Pakistan. He has more than 10 years of work experience in conflict and politics reporting. He is interested in social issues, politics and security issues.
Pakistan, Afghanistan working on MoU to begin media cooperation

By Delawar Jan and Rafiullah

Islamabad: Pakistan and Afghanistan are working on a Memorandum of Understanding to begin an era of cooperation in the field of media with hopes that it would help bring the two neighbourly nations closer to each other.

Currently, journalists from both the countries, especially from Pakistan, have no or marginal presence in each other’s country, allowing the Western media to feed information of its choice and interest. Also, none of the Afghan television channels could be watched in Pakistan. Afghan officials and citizens, however, say a couple of Pakistani television channels have been airing transmissions in their country.

“Pakistani journalists should be stationed in Afghanistan and vice versa,” said Mohammed Umar Daudzai, Afghanistan Ambassador to Pakistan. “But more than that we would like to have an arrangement where some Afghan television channels are watched through cable (in Pakistan).” The diplomat said two Pakistani television channels, AVT Khyber and Geo, had access to airwaves in Afghanistan but complained that Afghan channels were denied viewership in Pakistan. “So I think we should work on that (free access to each other’s TV channels).

The Islamabad embassy of Afghanistan is working on that to get some kind of MoU between the two concerned ministries that would allow presence of correspondents and would enable viewers to watch each other’s television channels,” Daudzai said.

An official of the information ministry in Islamabad said blocking of Afghan television channels was not Pakistan’s policy but media organisation of any country required to fulfil legal criteria. “We give landing rights to those foreign media outlets which submit fee and partner with a local stakeholder. I think none of the Afghan channels has applied for landing rights under the criteria,” she explained.

The media in Pakistan, particularly the electronic one, boomed during the last decade. However, experts say that it has failed to allocate resources to cover one of the most important conflicts that not only involves Islamabad’s interests but also has repercussions for its people.

What stops Pakistani media organisations to station their reporters in Afghanistan? Saleem Safi, a popular anchorperson, says: “Reporting Afghanistan is not the priority of media owners in Pakistan because it has less to do with the rating system prevalent in the country.” His view was supported by another senior anchorperson, Fahd Hussain. “I think there is a feeling here in the media that, perhaps, the general public in Pakistan is not very interested in watching the news from Afghanistan.” Hussain said media owners were reluctant to put money in an unstable country while logistics had also been a problem.

“Media groups are unwilling to spend even one rupee on reporting from Afghanistan. They aren’t ready to take the lead in starting direct coverage from there,” said Shamim Shahid, a senior journalist from Peshawar.

The government data suggests that 80 television channels, 150 FM radio stations and over 1,600 publications are currently operating in Pakistan. However, a Pashtu language television channel might be the only one that has stationed its correspondent in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Afghanistan’s Tolo and Shamshad television channels, along with Azadi Radio, have correspondents in Pakistan.

Fahd Hussain also believes that media in both the countries can play pivotal role in regional development: “I think if Pakistani media had some presence there, we would get better coverage. It would certainly help minimise misunderstandings, if not removing them altogether,” he opined.

The experts felt the media could better help improve the strained relations than any diplomat. People in the two countries mostly get information about each other through Western media, which, many believe, creates acrimony and mistrust. “Wittingly or unwittingly,” Safi says, “the Western media reporting about both the countries is in some way responsible for increasing misperceptions between the two nations.” He said the Western media might not be interested in reporting on positive aspects of Pak-Afghan relations. For example, he said, a story in media in Pakistan about good business or happy living by Pakistanis across the border could create goodwill among fellow countrymen for Afghanistan. “At the moment, that’s not happening,” Saif said.

Raza Rumi, Director Jinnah Institute in Islamabad, said it was urgent that Pakistani and Afghan media groups pressure their states to operate in each other’s country. “This arrangement will ensure the people have better access to information and there is a better policy climate for some agreement on the Afghan endgame,” he added.

Rafiullah works for Afghan National Television and Radio in Kunduz, Afghanistan.
Kabul: It was a sight rarely seen in traditional Afghan society. Last month, Fawzia Koofi, a presidential candidate for the 2014 elections and one of the 69 female Afghan parliamentarians, arrived to meet a delegation of Pakistani journalists. In the times of the Taliban, this face-to-face encounter between a woman and a group mostly comprising men, would have been inconceivable.

Watching her interact so freely and with such obvious confidence, one can see why she’s been named among the world’s “150 Fearless Women” by The Daily Beast news website for her bold account of the hardships that women face in Afghanistan in her book The Favoured Daughter. Wearing a solitaire ring and a chunky gold wristwatch on one hand, and carrying a designer bag on her arm, she reminded me a bit of Pakistan’s own foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar.

There’s a great deal of substance to go with the style as well, and Koofi talks eloquently and with passion. She talks openly about women’s empowerment through education and access to better healthcare, saying that great strides have been made in the 11 years after the fall of the Taliban regime. She may not quite be the modern Malalai of Maiwand, the celebrated 19th century folk hero who rallied the Pashtun army against the British in the 1880 Battle of Maiwand, but her struggle is equally heroic.

In a deeply patriarchal society that is yet to fully accept women’s rights and participation in public life, Koofi and her fellow women parliamentarians have refused to bow down to rigid ideals and often suffocating customs.

Talking to us, a group of journalists who were part of an Afghanistan-Pakistan fellowship, she describes how women had to physically grab the microphone to make a speech in parliament because the male MPs would ignore their turn and would oppose resolutions put forward by them, just because they were women.

Being a shrinking violet in Afghanistan’s often rowdy parliament just isn’t an option. In June this year, women MPs caused an uproar when Justice Minister Habibullah Ghaleb suggested, during a conference organised by the Women’s Affairs Committee, that more than 250 women living in 12 foreign-funded shelters were prostitutes. He had said the shelters were encouraging girls to disobey their parents if they were stopped from going outside their homes.

While the women MPs were unable to get Afghan President Hamid Karzai to sack Ghaleb, it was nevertheless an achievement to be able to challenge the opinions of a man on the floor of the parliament.

Likewise, the dismissal of former politician Malala Joya from parliament in May 2007 for publicly denouncing the presence of those she called warlords and criminals in parliament was followed by condemnation from female politicians and local women. Three years later, Joya’s name appeared in the list of “100 Most Influential Women” prepared annually by Time Magazine.

For Koofi, these are signs of hope. As her achievements would suggest, female parliamentarians have not settled for just being able to lambast society and state over the treatment of women. They have managed to wriggle out substantial — though still few — policy changes from the government.

After years of activism by Koofi and her fellow women parliamentarians, the government has fixed a quota for women in higher education institutions without which, she says, there is no point in allotting quotas for women in parliament. Egged on by this development, Koofi, who is also the chairperson of women rights in parliament — the only woman to have the post of a chairperson — has now proposed to President Karzai that at least one woman member be appointed in the Supreme Court.

“We need to increase women’s capacity for them to be able to effectively function on the political front,” she says. “This is the first time such a programme [like the new higher education policy] has been introduced for women. Trust me, this was not easy as months of work and campaigning are involved before a policy is approved.”

One indication of this is the Taliban’s absence of dissent to the presence of women in the High Peace Council’s governing body that is assigned with carrying out peace negotiations with them. Najia Zewari is one of two women who serve on the 15-member body, and it seems the Taliban have accepted her presence.

“The governing body directly negotiates with the Taliban, and that is not an easy thing to do,” she says. “But I am glad that us women have not once been criticised for being a part of the council.”

Overall, the HPC has 70 members, nine of which are women.

As Afghan women prepare themselves for a post-US withdrawal scenario, many of them are eager to take on new-found opportunities in Afghan politics. There has been a surge in admissions of female students in the Institute of Diplomacy (ID) in Kabul, and 21-year-old Hadeia Amiry, head of NGOs at the economics department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul, is one of them.

She hopes to become a politician one day, and says that she “would be more of a people’s representative than a conventional politician”. She is happy that the present government is supporting female political participation which, she says, cannot be increased until women receive higher education.

The ID’s one-year mandatory course for future diplomats includes subjects like politics, global political economy, conflict resolution, policy making, international relations, foreign languages, culture, ethics, organisational behaviour and entrepreneurship.

Other than the course, Amiry is also in the process of self-training: she wears suits and light makeup, and walks with obvious confidence. She crosses her hands at her back and broadens her shoulders while she stands to talk to her colleagues and guests at the office.
Yet at the same office, her colleague Samira (not her real name) is worried about getting permission from her husband for a one-week business-related foreign trip. She is a new bride and is not allowed to attend conferences abroad, even though her husband knew her from before and was aware that she worked at the foreign office.

This is what critics point to when they downplay the importance of Koofi and other likeminded women politicians and activists. To think that allowing women a few displays of opposition and giving them token political representation amounts to any substantial change in the way people think and act around them is naive at best, these critics contend. “It will take another three decades before Afghanistan is ready for a female president,” says Faheem Dashti, editor-in-chief of Kabul Weekly. “I doubt even five men can handle the country after all that it has been through.”

A prominent feminist, journalist-turned-politician Shukriya Barakzai, agrees that even if an Afghan woman is successful, she still remains a victim of tradition.

For traditions to change in a patriarchal society, men need to change their mindset. But the country director of the Open Society Foundation, Najla Ayubi, a judge-turned-human rights activist, says there is still a long way to go before education starts changing the minds of men in Afghanistan. She believes that the government is trying to appease the Taliban, and hence would not want women in decision-making political offices.

But no matter how painstakingly slow the progress on women’s political representation is, for a country like Afghanistan, where war has ravaged lives for decades and the patriarchal mindset has reigned supreme, it is at least a starting point. It may take many years, even generations, before Afghan women can measure up to their counterparts in other countries, but the first steps on the road to emancipation have been taken by women like Koofi and Barakzai.

A week of breaking stereotypes

By Ayesha Hasan

The funniest person I’ve met in my life is not a Pakistani, neither an Indian nor an American. He is (surprisingly for me) an Afghan. The most poignant person I’ve met in my life is not a Pakistani, neither a British, nor a Bengali. He is (surprisingly for me again) an Afghan.

I spent the third week of June with 11 Afghan and 10 Pakistani journalists. Though the Pakistanis had gathered to understand their western neighbour, we also saw a different side to our Pakistani fellows as never seen before.

Hailing from all four corners of the two countries, we, journalists, returned home with positive images, changed perceptions, unforgettable memories and most important of all: new friends.

Everyone had a unique story to tell, an idiosyncratic account of their lives and pied explanations and expectations, but some left an impression on my mind.

The funny side

I am grateful to Atif Fakirzada of Mediothek for letting us return home in “one piece”. The frequency of his jokes, comical allegory and the his unique way of connecting the dots that raised a wave of laughter across the boardroom were exceptional. While some would laugh to tears, other would hold tight to their ribs.

He killed the preconceived notion, which at least I had about Afghans, that they are rigid and serious and rarely laugh, on the very first day he had arrived. Stereotype number one, gone there and then.

The emotional side

When Bismillah Jan, a Pashtun Afghan, said in his self-introduction speech on the first day that he cried if he hurt someone or vice-versa, most of us speculated he was making up. But then, I came to know that he actually cried after finding out about the recent death of one of the participant’s father. When he laughed, he would lay down on the floor, simultaneously avoiding Cem, one of the moderators, who would try to capture the moment in his camera.

He killed the preconceived notion, which at least I had about Afghans, that they are rigid and serious and rarely laugh, on the very first day he had arrived. Stereotype number one, gone there and then.

A prominent feminist, journalist-turned-politician Shukriya Barakzai, agrees that even if an Afghan woman is successful, she still remains a victim of tradition.

Women parliamentarians are, in fact, aware of their limitations.
The assiduous side

When Malik Faisal Moonzajer from Sare Pol in Afghanistan told us that he was accepted at one of the best private universities in Islamabad, it was not less than a surprise for us. When he said it was a scholarship, we were flabbergasted.

He seeks education and refers it to his peers as well. He speaks fluent English and German and understands a little bit of Urdu, too. He belongs to a generation that grew up in war, was deprived of education, health facilities and freedom and held back from interacting with the world.

It was amazing and relieving, simultaneously, to see that he and his fellow colleagues, mostly in their 20s, have not grown into rebels after all. Stereotype three, broken there and then.

Ayesha Hasan lives in Lahore, Pakistan. She is a sub-editor at The Express Tribune and also a freelancer for Deutsche Welle. She is interested in gender, human rights and social issues. She is fluent in four languages including Pashto, her mother tongue.

The future of Pak-Afghan media cooperation

By Ayesha Hasan / Farkhunda Rajabe

ISLAMABAD: Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Minister for Information Mian Iftikhar Hussain recently met the management of Shamshad TV, one of the largest Afghan TV channels, and assured it that he would contact the the federal government as well as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) to allow for landing rights to the channel in Pakistan.

However, launching foreign channels in Pakistan has always been a difficult call. Former Pemra director general Rana Altaf Majeed claims that it was during his tenure that Tolo TV, an Afghan TV channel, was refused landing rights in Pakistan.

Deeming the broadcast to be “Against the national interests of Pakistan”, Majeed revealed that he still opposes the broadcasting of Afghan TV channels. “We cannot take this risk. The negative images of Pakistan shown by Afghan or Indian media are detrimental to Pakistan,” he said, adding that “we cannot bring foreign media to Pakistan without clearance from security and intelligence agencies.”

Journalists working in Pakistan and Afghanistan have been facing problems in accessing information from across the border. Therefore, they are dependent on foreign media and second-hand information.

Government verses journalists

Despite a law which allows free access to information for all citizens, journalists in Afghanistan have been facing difficulties in doing so.

Harun Najafizada, an Afghan correspondent for Persian TV with the British Broadcasting Corporation, said that journalists in Afghanistan and Pakistan were dependent on foreign agencies, since it was increasingly difficult to elicit information from local government ministries. Interestingly, Najafizada agreed that the Afghan embassy was generous in giving information to journalists.

Zardasht Shams, Press Attaché at the Afghanistan embassy in Islamabad, confirmed this, saying that they cooperated with journalists from both sides of the Pak-Afghan border in order to avoid the consequences of misrepresentation.

Sanjar Sohail, the chief editor of Hashst-i-Subh, one of the biggest Afghan newspapers, says his correspondents had never had access to raw information. This, he says, leads to availing second-hand sources. Furthermore, Sohail said Pakistan has a ‘bad reputation’ in Afghanistan, which consequently prevents reporters from going there.
The biggest concern of Afghans today is what will happen after 2014.

Stalled reconciliation process in Kabul

By Beenish Javed

Pakistan’s top diplomat in Afghanistan said, “We don’t have a roadmap from Afghanistan’s government on the reconciliation process.” According to him, many people in the Afghan government do not want the reconciliation process to succeed. Even members of High Peace Council do not recognize the reconciliation process, he says. In his view, the entire Afghanistan should have a consensus on the reconciliation process. Opponents of the peace process include many politicians, journalists and ministers who don’t want the peace process and they believe that war is the only solution. The ambassador suggests that Afghanistan should negotiate with insurgents with one voice.

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On the other hand, the spokesperson of the Afghanistan’s foreign ministry, Janan Moosazai says that his country has given a clear roadmap to the government of Pakistan on the reconciliation process. He stresses the government wants Pakistan to be a facilitator, and the government of Pakistan can take steps such as releasing Taliban prisoners in Pakistan to bring them to the negotiating table. According to him, the government of Afghanistan is in contact with Taliban leaders both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. One of the major criticisms the Pakistan’s government faces here in Kabul is their dual policy on the issue of reconciliation. According to Moosazai, many Taliban leaders, who had expressed desire to become part of the peace process were either apprehended or killed in Pakistan. However, Sadat Sami, a member of High Peace Council, which has 70 members, says that the effort by Islamabad to allow Afghan representatives to meet Abdullah Ghani Bradar, one of the Taliban leaders, is an excellent initiative. And more efforts from Pakistan’s government can help broker a peace deal with Taliban.

The international troops will withdraw their combat missions by the end of 2014. The majority of people are hoping that their government will be able to have a political settlement after the international forces withdraw. Not only the Afghan people but the entire international community is looking at the peace process as a window of opportunity for this country. “A lot of progress had been made in the reconciliation process, but the killing of Afghanistan’s first head of High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, stalled the progress”, says an official at Pakistan’s embassy in Afghanistan. Burhanuddin Rabbani had died in a suicide bomb attack on his home close to the American Embassy in Kabul on 20th September 2011.

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However, Information Ministry’s External Publicity Wing Director General Samina Parvez denies the problems and challenges faced by foreign journalists in Pakistan. “Currently, more than 200 foreign correspondents are working in Pakistan. They normally do not face any problems in accessing information or ID cards if they follow the procedure,” she said. Parvez also claims that Pakistani media is the “freest media in the world” with quite lenient media laws.

However, she added it was mandatory to be a Pakistani national to get landing rights for a TV channel.

Learning from American journalists

Talking about the journalists’ dependency on agency reports, South Asian Media School Director Khaled Ahmed said that Pakistani media lacked correspondents in Afghanistan and vice versa. There are some information sources in the conflict zones, but these fall under the threat of the terrorists, according to him.

“Information conveyed under threat is unreliable,” said Ahmed. He added that American sources are reliable because American journalists are paid enough to visit conflict-hit areas and write knowledgably about Afghanistan and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) on websites owned by American universities. While journalists like Farhat Taj escape to foreign universities, those like Saleem Shehzad and Januallah Hashimzada have been killed (or allegedly killed) by “agencies interested in masking reality”.

Journalists continue to face challenges in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The only way out is if the governments of either country allow exchange of information and broadcast of its respective TV channels across the borders.

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What came as a surprise to me is the extremely high anti Pakistan sentiment.

The anti-Pakistan narrative in Kabul
By Beenish Javed

Kabul: It’s been a week since I am in Afghanistan, and I absolutely love everything about Kabul. It is highly unfortunate that because of security situation I am not able to travel outside Kabul. But, the Kabul city itself is just remarkable and I am really lucky to be here. So far I have met Afghan parliamentarians, journalists, Afghan officials and also members of civil society. Obviously this sentiment comes from Pakistan’s policies about Afghanistan in the past. Afghans have horrible memories of the Taliban rule. And why won’t they have it? The women, that is 60 percent if the society and the civil society as a whole do not want Taliban rule again.

Right now in Kabul the 100 dollar question is whether Pakistan’s policy about Afghanistan has actually changed. To know that, we will first look at Pakistan’s foreign policy for Afghanistan in the last three to four years. The foreign office has clearly diversified its policies. Few of the obvious changes one notices are, Pakistan has considerably improved its relations with India and Iran. The focus is on improving trade and to work on new energy products. Examples can be of granting MFN status to India and pursuing the project of Pakistan-Iran gas pipeline despite pressure from the U.S.

Pakistan has worked hard to further strengthen the time-tested relationship with China and even with China the focus is to increase the bilateral trade. Pakistan has signed more than 100 MOUs with China regarding energy projects.

Lastly, the authorities have realized the futility of pursuing the concept of strategic depth in Afghanistan. Instability in Afghanistan has not only caused problems in Afghanistan, but its spillover effect in our country has been equally devastating for the country. Most of the Afghans I have come across here in Kabul still believe that Pakistan is supporting Afghan Taliban, and that Pakistan would want Taliban’s government in Afghanistan post 2014. However, if one looks at the facts and figures one realizes that economic prosperity is the biggest reason for Pakistan to change its policies. Not many people are aware, but after the U.S., Afghanistan is the second largest trading partner of our country, the annual trade between the two countries is 2.6 billion dollars. The trade figures soar to 5 billion dollars- if informal trade is also included.
Pakistan’s economy is not in a position to sustain more Afghan refugees. Pakistan is already hosting more than 3 million Afghan refugees, a civil war or an unstable Afghanistan would mean more Afghan refugees coming to Pakistan. More than 100,000 Pakistanis are working in Afghanistan. Pakistanis are working as doctors, consultants, engineers, teachers, bankers, laborers. Most of the people serving in the Afghan ministries are graduates from Pakistan. This is the reality of Afghanistan in 2012.

Unlike many Pakistani cities, in Kabul I have not witnessed power outage. To overcome the energy shortfall, Pakistan is desperately relying on international energy projects such as KASA 1000 and TAPI gas pipeline, both of which are dependent on a stable Afghanistan.

Most importantly, The TTP, on this side of the border, will get influenced by Afghan Taliban and would continue to challenge the government in Afghanistan. The problem however is, if the Pakistan’s military also realizes that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in the interest of Pakistan. The efforts by the civilian government are obvious. Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Hina Rabbani Khar has visited Kabul more than any other capital in the world. There have been statements made at the highest level by the Prime Minister, President and Foreign Minister that Pakistan is not going to repeat the same mistakes again. But we still have to see more efforts from the military establishment. Unfortunately despite all of the above-mentioned arguments, the Afghans don’t believe the policy on the ground has changed.

Afghans for centuries have been suffering from war; their lives have been horribly disturbed. Today, the biggest concern Afghans here in Kabul have is the continued interference of Pakistan in their domestic policies. Even if it’s the peace process, elections or a conflict between ethnicities, Pakistan should have no role in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan. For once, not only Pakistan but the international community as well should leave Afghanistan on its own, and let its people decide its future.

Pakistani policymakers have taken note of this. They have been trying to improve its relations with Afghanistan. The problem however is, if the Pakistan’s military also realizes that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in the interest of Pakistan. The efforts by the civilian government are obvious. Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Hina Rabbani Khar has visited Kabul more than any other capital in the world. There have been statements made at the highest level by the Prime Minister, President and Foreign Minister that Pakistan is not going to repeat the same mistakes again. But we still have to see more efforts from the military establishment. Unfortunately despite all of the above-mentioned arguments, the Afghans don’t believe the policy on the ground has changed.

So for all above mentioned reasons the civil government of Pakistan is trying to improve its relations with Afghanistan. The problem however is, if the Pakistan’s military also realizes that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in the interest of Pakistan. The efforts by the civilian government are obvious. Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Hina Rabbani Khar has visited Kabul more than any other capital in the world. There have been statements made at the highest level by the Prime Minister, President and Foreign Minister that Pakistan is not going to repeat the same mistakes again. But we still have to see more efforts from the military establishment. Unfortunately despite all of the above-mentioned arguments, the Afghans don’t believe the policy on the ground has changed.

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Pakistan sees itself sincere in stabilising Afghanistan

By Nasir Ahmad Waqif / Beenish Javed

ISLAMABAD: “Pakistan is willing to facilitate peace talks between the Taliban and Afghanistan, but is waiting for Afghanistan and Qatar to clear the way for the talks,” said a senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, who wish not be named. “Afghan and Qatari officials are working on setting up a Taliban office in Qatar and on rules for the talks,” the official added.

Kabul has been urging Islamabad since long to put pressure on the Taliban to force them to come to the negotiating table. Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan Muhammad Umar Doudzai said Afghanistan expects serious and timely steps from Pakistan to facilitate the reconciliation process with the Taliban.

“We have no doubt that Pakistan is seriously interested to see a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan, but we are still waiting to see results of Pakistan’s efforts.”

The official of Pakistan’s foreign ministry pointed out that Pakistan is not a main party in this process and thus it can only play the role of a facilitator.

“The last core group meeting two months ago between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US was significant in this regard,” said the official. The core group decided to provide safe passage to all Taliban who want to negotiate and their names would be removed from the UN sanction list in case they travel to a third country, the official added.

The official confirmed the frequent assertions by the Pakistani government that it does not want a destabilised Afghanistan after foreign troops leave the country at the end of 2014. Therefore, the official said that Pakistan would support all peace talks, whether they are in Qatar or Saudi Arabia, with one condition: “They must be lead by Afghanistan.”

Afghan political analyst, Ahmad Saeed blames Pakistan’s intelligence agencies for not putting enough pressure on Taliban. Saeed, who is a former Afghan diplomat to Pakistan, said, “Reaching regional peace and stability is only possible when Pakistan’s intelligence agencies put pressure on Taliban to bring them to the negotiating table.”

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Why Pakistan is failing in its diplomacy in Afghanistan?
By Taha Siddiqui

Kabul: Just like in Pakistan, politicians, clerics and people love to blame America for the country’s woes; in Afghanistan everyone accuses Pakistan for all the problems in their country.

From areas that are attacked by the Taliban in the southern part of the country including Kandahar, Kunar and Helmand, targeting civilians and security forces, to shelling from across the borders that Afghans claim are forcing hundreds to be displaced from their homes on this side of the Durand Line, the situation of law and order is bleak and somehow the public narrative here always links it to Pakistan’s interference.

And as the authorities in Afghanistan struggle to keep everything intact post 2014, the year western forces have announced their withdrawal from this region and have committed to transition of responsibility of Afghan matters to the local authorities, Pakistan seems to be losing their chance to be part of that transition.

Pakistan always highlights that it has hosted almost three million Afghan refugees since thirty years along with economic dependence with Pakistan - being the largest exporter to Afghanistan by sending items ranging from raw materials to human resources, yet Pakistan fails when it comes to its diplomacy.

Speaking to government officials, media personnel and civil society in Afghanistan, the biggest concern they have is that Pakistan does not believe in the current Afghan political setup and Pakistan is still stuck in the eighties and nineties policies of supporting the jihadis to be in power in Kabul.

However, Pakistan claims that it is challenging to control cross-border attacks. The **militants have sanctuaries on each side of the border**, Pakistani officials point out, adding that on both sides they are not being nurtured by the governments, thereby refusing to accept any blame put on them from Kabul.

The official of Pakistan’s foreign ministry said that political stability in Afghanistan is a crucial factor for security and economic development in Pakistan. If instability in Afghanistan prevails, “it will trickle down to Pakistan and a government in Kabul ruled by Taliban would influence extremist elements in the tribal belt.” The official feared that this could create a huge problem for Pakistan.

A stabilised Afghanistan on the other hand would give Pakistan access to Central Asian markets. Projects such as TAPI gas pipeline to transport Tajik gas through Afghanistan and Pakistan up to India, or CASA 1000, which will urgently fulfil energy needs of Pakistan, are depending on Afghan stability.

Pakistan’s former ambassador to Afghanistan, Ayaz Wazir, presents a solution to the current problem. He believes that Afghanistan’s neighbours, Pakistan and Iran, have great influence in Afghanistan, and together with the US, if these three countries compromise a bit on their interests, they can come up with a sincere plan for Afghanistan. This will ultimately lead to a successful reconciliation process with the Taliban, he believes, and reduce the cross border tensions.

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**Nasir Ahmad Waqif** He is a reporter in Al Jazeera TV in the northern zone of Afghanistan. He also writes for Khidmat newspaper. His area of interest is politics and social issues.

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But overall, he said there is “a clear consensus among Pakistan’s government and military that Pakistan is interested in a peaceful Afghanistan, which would lead to a prosperous Pakistan”.

Another issue that strains the relationship between the two neighbouring countries is cross-border terrorism. Ambassador Doudzai is getting impatient with Pakistan’s perceived inactivity on the issue. “Pakistan can do much to control cross-border terrorism,” he claimed.

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Officials in the government here emphasize that they want nothing more than honesty from their Pakistani counterparts. And the mistrust is based on experiences of the past, lies in the present and politics of future that Pakistanis are accused of here. “They are playing a double game” many will say. And the media and civil society resonates with the same view.

On the other hand, the view in Pakistan is completely different. For the common man, while Afghans are considered to be an extension of the Pashtoons living on this side, the officials go one hand further, saying not only is Afghanistan heavily dependent on Pakistan, but the new Afghan officials are not to be taken seriously since they are all “Shaukat-Aziz” phenomena – the Pakistan Prime Minister under Musharraf regime – they will pack their bags and also head back when the West leaves.

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So while the Pakistani officials might say they will not interfere in Afghanistan in future and that this time they are talking to all different ethnicity in this country (unlike in the past), their ‘words’ betray them since they consider the current government ‘immature’.

But what they do not realize is that even though Afghans in power here are mostly young faces, they will not leave the country they have gotten after thirty years of war. There is a new generation in the country that is in power which has different plans for the country’s future.
But it is not like the fault always lies with Pakistan — Afghans have issues they need to resolve and put their house in order too. Firstly the Afghans need to clear their heads of the over-zealous nationalism, because for example whether it is Afghan music, poetry and culture, nationalism and the love for their land takes over all their logic at times. Then whatever role they have in life, be it journalists, diplomats or politicians.

Secondly, their disbelief in the Durand Line leads to many of the preconceived biases against Pakistan. And more than sixty years later, the Afghans still want the Durand Line to ‘disappear’ from the map. Not accepting the borders and thus not fencing it is just asking for trouble from your own haunted past. It is not as if the Haqqanis living in Pakistan have become nationals of Pakistan. Afghans forget that it was they who went at war with themselves and Haqqanis are part of that era.

But here the argument that Pakistanis should expel the Haqqanis or other Afghan Taliban from their area holds value too because Pakistan doesn’t and that is where the ball is thrown back in its court.

But where the Afghans make mistake in their entire huff and puff against Pakistan is they forget that majority on the other side of the Durand Line is also victims of a deep state.

Pakistan has lost governments, people and respect internationally because of the powerful establishment at work in the past, and the possibility for it to be repeated cannot be ruled out. The country is a victim of a military rule for majority of its independent history.

Nevertheless Pakistani government needs to put its foot down and stop those elements within their own ranks that still support an alternate setup in Afghanistan and hiding them in North Waziristan. This, firstly because these so-called “strategic assets” give Pakistan the ‘terrorist-country’ title not just in Afghanistan but around the world.

Secondly the deep state should know that ‘the peace talks with Taliban’ is not an opportunity for Taliban to come and rule the country once again, but as a senior Afghan official says – They have to renounce their old ways and respect Afghanistan as it is today—a modern, youthful and fast-developing country.

If Pakistan does not also mend its ways and improve on its diplomacy, they will be surrounded by unfriendly neighbouring governments. Is that the kind of future it wants in the region?

Many Afghans will say they are nationalists first

Taha Shakeel Siddiqui lives in Islamabad, Pakistan and works for France 24 and Christian Science Monitor. Before this, he experienced working in different fields of journalism for more than 6 years, such as TV, radio and print. He is also engaged in human rights issues, especially minorities and women’s rights. When he is not at work he loves to travel to new places. He tweets @tahassiddiqui

Future of Afghan refugees still uncertain

By Taha Siddiqui / Ahmad Yama Shirzad

ISLAMABAD: “This refugee card I have is powerless,” said Khwaja Meeraajuddin, who fled to Pakistan in 1992 from Kabul, as violence erupted in Afghanistan when the civil war broke out in 1991.

Because his status as refugee authorized by the Government of Pakistan, in collaboration with United Nation’s Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Afghan Government, expires in just six months.

“Earlier this year, they refused to renew our visas, and now our refugee status will end in December 2012 too,” said Meeraajuddin as he showed the card issued to him by the National Database Regulatory Authority in Pakistan (NADRA).

According to the migrant, who lives with his wife, her mother and two sons in a three room upper portion of a house in Islamabad, their family visa was not renewed; and now his bank account, his cellular phone subscription and his rental agreement can be cancelled because the card is not recognised as an authorised document by the private sector, since the interior ministry has not communicated about it.

“Only the police recognise this card, but even they sometimes harass us and ask for money even though we are registered,” added Meeraajuddin.

UNHCR spokeswoman in Pakistan, Dunira Aslam, agreed that the card holds no value and said the interior ministry should communicate to everyone so that problems being faced by the refugees can be resolved. “But even if the card expires at the end of this year, it does not mean they will be forced to leave the country,” Aslam said, referring to a trilateral agreement between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United Nations.

According to the UNHCR, Afghan refugees constitute the largest and longest-standing refugee situation in its history. Despite the return of some 5.7 million Afghans to their homeland since 2002, there are still around 2 million registered Afghans in Pakistan, while sources in the Afghan embassy say there are around 1 million unregistered Afghans.

When contacted, Afghanistan’s Ambassador to Pakistan Umer Daudzai agreed that refugees are facing uncertainty, but was hopeful they will be allowed an extension. “No one can force them out and even the last time in 2009, the cards were renewed for three years and we expect the same this time too,” said Daudzai.

He also urged the Pakistani government to ensure that the refugees are treated well. “We reacted strongly to the statement by the
government of Pakistan, recently, calling Afghans in the country, adding to the problem of terrorism. They should be careful and not say such things,” the ambassador added, saying such issues lead to harassment by security forces. Senator Haji Adeel, who belongs to Awami National Party, and is part of the federal government, said the trilateral agreement needs to be revisited. “If we continue to host these refugees, we need monetary support from the international community,” said Adeel.

The senator further added that the unregistered refugees should immediately repatriate, and June 30th this year is the deadline for them to go back, while the registered should go home too.

But Daudzai, the Afghan ambassador, and refugees feel that settling back home can be difficult. “We cannot accommodate the refugees if they all come back at the same time,” said Daudzai.

And in recent years, return rates have slowed according to UNHCR. In 2011 only 70,000 Afghan refugees returned home. And Meerajuddin voices his fears of returning to his homeland. “When the NATO troops pull out, there will be a power struggle in Afghanistan again and if we go back now, I am scared for the security of my children,” he said. “I have spent most of my life in Pakistan, and going back I know there is nothing for me in Afghanistan,” Meerajuddin added.

Ahmad Yama Shirzad works for BBC in Afghanistan. He has been working with media for the last ten years. He studied journalism with the BBC. My last report was about women-oriented radio stations in the Kunduz area.

**Afghans do It better**

By Sundus Rasheed

It seems ‘Kabuli’ is THE place to eat in Islamabad – Afghan being the hot new in cuisine in the capital these days. Also, Habibi – a mix of Afghan, Central Asian and Middle Eastern is worth a try too and the old Karachi classic BBQ Tonight is now in Lahore and Islamabad too. Gone are the days of the Afghan naan wala, we now have a cool, new breed of Afghans showing the capital what food is all about.

But of course, the best way to experience a cuisine is in people’s homes. And hearts. The Afghan embassy in Islamabad was kind enough to host myself and colleagues from the media – from both Pakistan and Afghanistan attending the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Afghanistan-Pakistan Journalist Exchange Fellowship Programme. The Afghan Ambassador Mr. Muhammad Umair Daudzai and his staff were gracious hosts. I told him I was doing a story on the growing influence of Afghan culture in Pakistan and he personally took the time to explain each dish on the spread to me. Here goes:

Where does all this flavor come from? Slow cooking the beef and then cooking the rice in that beef broth with cinnamon and cardamon.

As you can see, most of this dish is gone. Skewered, barbecued tender pieces of chicken and beef are probably the stars of Afghan cuisine. So rich, so simple – you’re never quite sure when you’re full.

What a pretty name for a dish! Zamarud being emerald, of course. This is basically a vegetarian Pilaf with spinach, dill and leeks with very simple seasoning. I was told lamb or beef can be added to this – which reminds of an Arab staple at my home – a pilaf made with fried meat, dill and peas, with the same ‘zamarud’ tinge.

By far my most favorite dish of the night! The humble eggplant/baingan done so well! Grilled slices of eggplant topped off with a tomato sauce and a garlic yogurt. This is definitely one I will be trying in my kitchen.

Remember my love for Nepalese momos? The Afghan-Tajik version of these dumplings is a little more suited to the ‘desi’ palate. These ‘mantus’ are stuffed with raw meat and then steamed. They are usually topped with a garlic yogurt and a tomato and ‘channa dal’ sauce. It’s an interesting little mouthful – lots of different textures and flavors.

Simply because, as the Ambassador said, ‘Afghans love spinach.’ Which might explain the ‘fitness’ of Afghan men. And women, of course. More power to the spinach!

Also on the menu, some Pakistani influences in the form of a mutton stew and chicken qorma.
3. Trek on the foodie trail

Kabul seems to be have a greater variety of restaurants than Karachi – thanks to the huge expat population in the city – Mexican, Italian, Korean, Russian, Thai, Japanese, French, Indian, Middle Eastern and of course, the delectable Afghan cuisine itself. I am hoping to check out more local food establishments than foreign but definitely want to see how the more ‘posh’ outlets compare with those in Pakistani cities.

4. Visit an Afghan family home

Simple enough. You never really understand a city until you visit a home. Hopefully I can get one of my Afghans colleagues or friends to invite me to their home and meet their families and talk to them.

5. Kabul nightlife

Yup. There is such a thing. Kabul has a thriving expat scene supported by well paid aid workers, journalists, diplomats and ‘contractors’. Interesting to see what it would be like to party in the time of war (a bit like Karachi, perhaps?). The two names that keep popping up are Gandamak, established by a former British soldier turned BBC cameraman and L’Atmosphere by a French radio journalist.

Sounds like a plan! Who’s with me?

The To-Do list for Kabul

By Sundas Rasheed

The second leg of the FES Afghanistan-Pakistan Journalism Fellowship 2012 is due to begin in early October. In the second phase of the programme, 11 Pakistani journalists will travel to Afghanistan and once again work with their Afghan counterparts on stories of mutual interest.

As we start thinking about what stories we want to do, I can’t help but want to know more and more about the magnificent yet heart-breaking city of Kabul – it’s past splendour and current attractions. However, it is not often that people think of Kabul in terms of it’s ‘attractions’ – but why not? Browsing through various travel websites and blogs has lead me to believe that Kabul is a city that’s brimming with excitement, you just have to know where to look.

So here’s my list of ‘things to do in Kabul’ – let’s see how many of these things I get around to doing:

1. Visit the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM):

As a project of the Ministry of Education, ANIM provides free music education to young Afghans. Students who have financial difficulty and/or are earning members of their family are even given special ‘scholarships’ to make up for their loss of income. The institute was founded by and currently run by Dr. Ahmad Nasser Sarmast, a PhD in Music. I was introduced to ANIM by my very talented friend, musician and ANIM faculty member William Harvey. Harvey is also the co-founder of the Afghan Youth Orchestra.

2. Check out Chicken Street

This sounds a lot like Bohri Bazar in Karachi. All kinds of handicrafts are available here, from jewellery to carpets, ‘antique’ muskets to lapis lazuli. Most of the buyers are foreign, so prices are bound to be scaled up. I’m not sure what the verdict is on women wandering around Chicken Street. I think I am going to need a male escort – preferably a local.

Kabul. The experience of any city is created by the ‘user.’ You can make any city our own. Even in a city as close as Karachi, Kabul is deemed ‘exotic’ and adventurous. As a Pakistani, it is closer to home than most of us would imagine. However, Kabul is not for tourists, it is for travelers. But there is a romance in the air that is unmistakable. If you are in Kabul, explore something besides the ruins and war relics.

Food Trail

Kabul, like Karachi, has only one kind of nightlife – a foodie kind of nightlife. But it can be a little bit more risqué/ fun that Karachi. While Karachi asks you to bring your own, Kabul serves its own. Kabul has a decent variety of cuisines being served across the city. Thai, Chinese, Indian, Croatian, Middle Eastern and many more.

Kebabs are everywhere in Kabul! For traditional Afghan food head to Sufi. The restaurant is frequented by expats and visiting delegations as an introduction to Afghan food and will cost you about $10-12. For a flavor of the aid-worker/foreign journalist watering hole try L’Atmosphere – a French restaurant serving crepes, pizzas, pastas, salads and soups. The bar area is rather popular for obvious reasons. The food is a bit pricey but the music is nice – starting with classics in the early evening and ending with Lady Gaga and Pitbull at night. A meal and drinks will set you back by $20. To eat where the locals eat, try Barg Restaurant in
the Khair Khana bazaar. Barg serves Western fast food and local fare. The ground floor is for men and the upper floors are for families. Meal and drinks will cost you no more than $7.

Kabul also has fantastic street food – pakoras, fries, deep fried ‘aloo paratha’ and spicy corn on the cob – from 5 to 10 Afghani.

It is not uncommon for most ‘meetings’ to take place at lunch. It seems most offices, organizations and even ministries have their own mini-catering units, manned mostly by women. These lunches will be the best food you find anywhere in Kabul.

Bazaars

There are plenty of bazaars all over Kabul. The cool weather makes it easy to spend hours in a bazaar but the dust doesn’t help. Mandavi, is a whole sale market selling almost everything you can imagine – vegetables, fruits, clothes, shoes, motorcycles, mattresses, biscuits – from Afghanistan as well as Pakistan, Iran and China. Of course, the one thing you must buy from here are the dry fruits – go for the local produce instead of those imported from Iran.

If you’re looking for more contemporary shopping then head to the Laisa Marium bazaar in the Khair Khana locality – you can find traditional Afghan outfits here, colorful, embroidered kurtas for men and women. It’s also a great place for people watching. The Shar Nau area is great for loitering around and get posters of Afghan heroes and local handicrafts. Most of the malls including Kabul Mall and City Center are also located in the area.

People

By far, the most interesting thing about Kabul is it’s people. The city is rich with stories. Nearly every Afghan I have spoken to in Kabul has lived in Pakistan and speaks Urdu fluently. The people on the streets are friendly and love telling their stories – even if they are a bit exaggerated. Striking a conversation is not difficult. Kabul is a microcosm of Afghan society – Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek and the foreigners from all over the world. Take the time to visit sporting events, cafes, barber shops, beauty salons and markets and talk to people to get the real flavor of Kabul.

Music

Kabul has a thriving music scene – both local and foreign. There are some plenty of venues that host and groom young musicians. The French Cultural Center in Kabul, recently hosted the Sound Central Festival – an alternate music festival featuring bands from Central and South Asia and beyond.

The Venue is a space for young musicians to get together and jam. The Venue is run by Humayun Zadran, an avid music supporter working on several music related projects including ‘The Bridge’ – which currently brings Pakistani musicians to Afghanistan. If you are a rock music fan, look out for performances by Kabul Dreams. Kabul Dreams consists of young Afghan men, who are average musicians at best but rock and roll needs all the encouragement and support it can get. White City is another Kabul based rock band consisting of an Australian, a Brit and a Swede, who describe themselves as ‘rock therapy.’

The dust never settles in Kabul. There is a permanent slow moving haze. In October, the air is chilly and dry – dry enough to cut skin. Kabul is not an easy city – moving around the city is difficult and slow; the weather can be harsh; a woman’s laughter might offend someone on the street. – but it is a city that will embrace you only when you begin to embrace it. I would love to return to Kabul and get to know it even better, because this was one of the hardest goodbyes I have had to say….

Kabul eats: L’Atmosphere

By Sundus Rasheed

Kabul, like Karachi, has only one kind of nightlife – a foodie kind of nightlife. But it can be a little bit more risqué/fun that Karachi. While Karachi asks you to bring your own, Kabul serves its own. Kabul has a decent variety of cuisines being served across the city. Thai, Chinese, Indian, Croatian, Middle Eastern and many more. The next few blog entries will showcase some of Kabul’s best eateries. Here’s the first in my ‘Kabul Eats’ series.

If you look up any travel guide to Kabul, you are bound to come across the name L’Atmosphere – a French restaurant/bar catering mainly to the expat community but locals are served too (there are places where locals are denied entry. Colonial much?). L’Atmosphere has three dining areas – an outdoor area, the bar/pub area with sofas and bar stools and a more formal dining area with tables and chairs.

It is located in the Qalla-e-Fatullah area, about 10 minutes away from the central district of Shar Nau. Don’t let the road to L’Atmo intimidate you – it is under construction and basically a mess right now (think Shireen Jinnah colony or Sohrab Goth 10 years ago). However, no road is too hard for a taxi to get to. Security is a bit more relaxed here – the guards will check your bags and ask a couple of ‘friendly’ questions but cameras are allowed and you will not be asked for identification.

We opted to sit in the bar area which was by far the most popular part of the restaurant – occupied mostly by American and European expats. The menu is surprisingly extensive – with crepes, pizzas, pastas, salads, soups, steaks and desserts. Alcohol is not ‘on the menu’ but it is available – beer, whiskey, rum, vodka and wine.

When dining in Kabul, place your order quickly. The food takes a while to arrive, about 20-25 minutes for the soups and salads and even. We ordered a bunch of starters – fried camembert with cherry jam, chicken salad and French onion soup.

The chicken salad was loaded with a spicy chicken chunks on a bed of ice-berg lettuce, cucumbers and onion and no dressing. Luckily, the chicken was not over-cooked and the vegetables were fresh and crunchy so you don’t really miss out on flavor.
Pizza has got to be the world’s favorite comfort food. No matter where you come from and where you are eating, pizza is bound to make you feel at home. L’Atmosphere has a range of pizzas – easily categorized by the toppings/meat on them – chicken, beef, cheese and so on. We ordered the chicken. The pizza was fairly large – to be easily shared between two as a main.

After a really ambitious ‘Western meal’ we ended our indulgence with a chocolate crepe and ice-cream.

The entire meal along with drinks (including alcoholic ones) cost about $150 for the four of us. Remember, expat dining in Kabul is expensive as it is limited and exclusive. L’Atmosphere is where the well-heeled expats come to play so you know what to expect.

And the biggest thank you of all to the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Pakistan and Afghanistan for letting me bring Kabul that much closer to Karachi – as part of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Journalism Fellowship Exchange Programme – Understanding the Neighbour.

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The fried Camembert was a quick reminder that we were in fact still in Kabul. No complaints about the cheese but the sweet, bottled cherry jam gave it all away. The hot cheese on bread still works though.

The Nordic crepes were stuffed with lots and lots of Salmon – a real treat in a landlocked Afghanistan. The crepe itself was light and soft. My company could not wait until I took a picture, hence, half a crepe only in the picture.

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Strings attached

We are like children of two such families whose fathers have had interpersonal disputes that are consequently affecting the children.

I stopped blaming Pakistan after I found out that an Afghan from Khost had carried a suicide attack in Jawzjan province some time back. All I can blame is my own traitor: The Afghan.

I neither blame Pakistan when Afghans complain for not being treated well there. After all they are there for work and not as guests. But I will always voice out when an illiterate Afghan policeman slaps a university teacher in the face in front of people and insult him.

A documentary by the Pakistani government shows some Pakistani soldiers singing their national anthem. After listening to it carefully, I noticed it’s in Persian, something I never new before, despite being a neighbour. I was more than shocked.

I have realized that Pakistan is not the problem. The main problem is that we always blame Pakistan for our internal crises – the ethnic matters. When I was a child, I was told that Shiite (Ahle Tashee) are the ‘dirtiest’ and was forbidden from going to their homes or accepting water or anything to eat from the let alone making friends with them.

In Afghanistan, the story is quite different. I remember in 2007 one of the journalists in Afghanistan National Radio channel was forced to resign for using a Persian word for ‘university’ when he was expected to say it in Pashto (Danishgah instead of Pohanton). The Afghanistan Information and Culture minister had become furious for using the ‘infidel’s words’.

I have realized that Pakistan is not the problem. The main problem is that we always blame Pakistan for our internal crises – the ethnic matters. When I was a child, I was told that Shiite (Ahle Tashee) are the ‘dirtiest’ and was forbidden from going to their homes or accepting water or anything to eat from the let alone making friends with them.

Later, during my university years, I met a number of people from the Shiite community and realized how wrong they all were. Now most of my friends are Shiites.

In Pakistan, I never came across any such feelings for the Afghans. I was rather greeted the Pakistani way by people on the streets, in the restaurants and markets.

I was born to hate Pakistanis
By Faisal Malik Moonjazer

During the last days of our exchange programme in Islamabad, one of my Pakistani counterparts, Delawar Jan, asked me, "You said you really hated Pakistanis when you were in Afghanistan. Where did all this hate come from?"
Seems like I have thousands of memories from each one of them being so kind to us.

I remember Ms Ayesha Hasan, who interviewed me for a report in her newspaper, on our first day in Bara Gali. Mr Haris, who recited a number Persian poems from different Persian poets. I could say if he was better than me in sense of loving and memorizing Persian poems.

One thing that made me very happy was the invitation from one of my Pakistani counterparts, Ms Sundus Rasheed, to a concert. It was a big concert with young singers and great audience. We all loved being in the front row at the concert, especially left empty for us. I watched and enjoyed the live concert for the first time in my life.

Muhammad Malick, resident editor of The News in Islamabad, says that the pouring in of foreign aid in Afghanistan changes the scenario. “Economic independence is the biggest

Ms Rasheed also took me to the office of Pakistan’s largest English daily newspaper, Dawn, so I can freely look over Pakistani newspapers for headlines about Afghanistan in Pakistani media. When I got to the archives, I met someone special – Mr Ramzan Ali - the librarian. He was a man of discipline. Everything in place- newspapers were archived by alphabets. He made me feel as if I was at my own office. I asked him for lots of files. When I asked him if I could take photos of the headlines, he smiled and said, “When it is your office, you can do whatever you want,”

I am not comparing it but I remember once being punched in my face in my country while taking photos.

Friendship, kindness, good behaviour, support, humility and honesty these were all things I found in my Pakistani counterparts. Looking at the photos and recalling the good memories– every minute reminds me of their smiles and kindness.

I urge the media from both countries to let us, the people, decide who is the enemy and who is the friend. Do not feed us with enmity from the day when we are born, instead, I request them to promote a culture of peace and friendship.

Afghanistan-Pakistan imbroglio: trade is the solution

By Shah Zaman Khan

There is a widening gap in perception and reality between Pakistan and Afghanistan on the issue of economic and trade cooperation. Both Islamabad and Kabul have divergent opinions on formal and informal trade. Pakistan is repeatedly saying that it is flexible in its policy and is facilitating trade.

In fact, Pakistan embassy is now claiming that the policy towards Afghanistan has changed. “We want friendship with the entire Afghanistan. We will support any group which controls Kabul. We have extended our relations equally towards every faction of Afghanistan, including non-Pashtoons,” says Mohammad Sadiq, Pakistan’s ambassador to Afghanistan in a conversation with Pakistani journalists in Kabul.

Pakistan is increasingly working in the spheres of education, health, road and building construction and other fields to win the hearts of Afghan people. “We have given [thousands of] scholarships. Up to 500,000 Afghan children are receiving education at the primary school level. Afghanistan has 30,000 graduates from Pakistan. Some 7,000 out of 10,000 Afghans who study abroad are currently enrolled in Pakistan’s higher educational institutions,” said Ambassador Sadiq.

But Kabul needs result-oriented and practical support from Pakistan on the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan, a spokesman for the Afghan foreign ministry Janan Mosazai said in an interview. Kabul considers the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) as one of its priorities in its relationship with Pakistan. It underscores the importance of the implementation of APTTA and all other agreements. “We are grateful to Pakistan for extending support and cooperation in the fields of higher education, healthcare, provision of scholarships, and hosting millions of Afghan refugees through the years. “It puzzles us as to why Islamabad is not implementing this pact. We are committed to this agreement and would like to extend it to Tajikistan, and even to India,” said Mosazai. “We are also 100 per cent committed to CASA-100 and TAPI projects with Pakistan,” he said.

On the other hand, Pakistan and Afghan analysts believe that most of the export trade involving Afghanistan is through Pakistan. The volume of trade has reached $2.6 billion. Unofficially, this figure stands at $5 billion, a senior official at the Pakistan mission in Kabul claimed.

The signing of security and peace agreements with Pakistan is dependent on the dismantling of the support systems for terrorism and extending of practical support for peace and reconciliation efforts, Afghan officials said.

Policy analysts and researchers on the issue of Pak-Afghan relations do not see a paradigm shift in Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan. But they say that in the field of trade and
business relations between the two neighbouring countries have seen a visible improvement. Along with that they also propose the creation of more incentives. “Pakistan should provide incentives to traders and open its routes for the trade,” Ayaz Wazir, a former envoy to Afghanistan and an analyst on Pak-Afghan relations. “Pakistan should invest in Afghanistan and not on any ethnic group. That policy has cost Pakistan dearly. We should invest in the stability and unity of Afghanistan. That will yield results,” said Rustam Shah Mohmand, ex-ambassador to Afghanistan. Our mission in Kabul, however, insists that it is already doing so.

Some analysts see hope for a minimal change in Pakistan’s policy. “Now we see a positive change in Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan but we expect more positive results from this policy,” said Sarwar Ahmadzai, a researcher at the Regional Study Centre of Afghanistan.

“In the current situation, trade can bring a qualitative change in the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Both Pakistanis and Afghans can mutually secure their financial interests and forge better relations. Pakistan should increase investment in other fields such as health and education. Both the countries should work together for the prosperity of Afghanistan and Pakistan” Ahmadzai added.

Trade, it appears, is the only field through which relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan can be made better. The sooner officials on both sides realize this the better it will be for the region.

Shah Zaman Khan is from Geo News in Peshawar, Pakistan. He worked as sub-editor and assignment editor in various magazines, newspapers and news channels. His fields of interest are militancy, politics, sports, culture, education and health. Recently published articles were on the subject of FATA women education in dark and the situation of FATA IDPs.

Bleak fate of civilians on both sides of Durand Line
By Shah Zaman Khan / Abdul Mateen Sarfaraz

ISLAMABAD / KABUL: Eyes brimming with tears, 50-year-old Zakirullah Mamond of Sarakai, a small village in Bajaur Agency, uttered these poignant and disconcerting words, “Our lives do not serve any real cause other than to be part of collateral damage.”

On June 16 last year, militants attacked three villages of Sarakai, Mokha and Manro Jangal which are situated on the Durand Line, about 60 km west of Khar, the agency headquarters. In this attack Zakir lost his wife, son and sister. Brushing away tears he said, “I don’t care, whether it was Pakistan, Afghanistan or NATO who fired the rocket. All I know is that it destroyed my loving family.”

The latest of the series of cross-border attacks took place in Upper Dir, in which 13 soldiers on patrol were killed.

Mamond is not alone in sharing this bleak fate. As per reports, 703 innocent people have been killed in different acts of terror during the first quarter of 2012. Of this tally, most casualties occurred in incidents of cross-border aggression, including firing and drone strikes.

Forces of Afghanistan, Pakistan and NATO are engaged in operations against militants on the Durand Line. The locals are not only being killed in crossfire from one side, but are sandwiched between the fighting forces from all directions.

In phases of heightened acrimony between the states, militancy is seen to increase proportionally. Senior journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai says, “The issue of cross-border infiltration of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban has become a major irritant in the Pak-Afghan relations.” Since both sides have failed to stop the Taliban effectively, they are constantly busy in a blame game against each other.

The prevention of cross-border raids necessitates that solid steps be taken by both Kabul and Islamabad. First, the allies—Pakistan and the US—need to remove trust deficit and engage the security forces effectively on both sides of the divide.

“Trust between the intelligence agencies of each state, CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), KHAD (Khidmate Ettelat-e Dawlati) and ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) should be established. All stakeholders should be given a chance to take part in dialogue with Taliban,” a senior Peshawar-based journalist Shamim Shahid said.

Governor of Kunar province (Afghanistan) Fazlullah Wahidi admits that Pakistan is not behind incidents of cross-border attacks. However, he said it is hard to convince Afghans living in the border areas who believe that some factions of Taliban enjoy Pakistan backing. Yousafzai believes that the blame game would serve no constructive purpose, other than to
Life of Pakistani workers in Kabul

By Mohammad Arsalan Bakhtiar

Kabul: “Four years ago when I told my friends and family back in Pakistan’s northern city of Mardan that I was moving to Afghanistan to start a new career, none of us imagined this would become a regular feature of his life. Indeed, my family’s initial reaction was to question my sanity. And who could blame them? So much of what the word “Kabul” evokes is negative,” said Daud Badshah, supervisor of a local restaurant in Afghanistan’s capital.

The 26-year-old Daud gets up at 6:00am because he lives with his Afghan colleagues in a room and he is supposed to be ready at 8:00am and reach the restaurant at 9:00am. He comes to the restaurant by bus and people recognise that he is a Pakistani national. “Whenever tension boils over between the two countries I am taunted by some Afghan that ‘look at what Pakistanis are doing with Afghans’.”

The restaurant is located in the main market of Kabul and his main duty is to deal with the customers. Restaurant owner selected him as the supervisor because he is a Pakistani and they are thought to be more polite and friendly. However, the restaurant owner is from Afghanistan. Before crossing the border, Daud was working in Pakistan where he used to earn 4,000 rupees a month. He has eight brothers and his father is a watchman in Pakistan, earning 9,000 Pakistani rupees (approximately 95$) per month. He has been living in Kabul since 2008 and getting 9,000 Afghan rupees (approximately 17,000 Pakistani rupees) per month.

“Oh, May be, I mused, I’d move to Dubai, Saudi Arabia or some another country in the Gulf region. I have to admit Afghanistan wasn’t really on my radar screen until an actual, well-paid job opportunity in Kabul presented itself to me. It was a perfect mesh with my skills and I felt the fates had aligned in my favour. Therefore, in early January 2008 I crossed the border through Torkham to reach Afghanistan, my new home. To be honest, I had no money to move to Dubai.”

“Sometimes I feel bad when I go back to my city Mardan. On the way to Peshawar, Afghan police officials stop our vehicle and ask where I am from. Whenever they know that we are from Pakistan they create some problems and demand money from us. And really it is my belief that our Pakistani forces do the same with Afghans across the border.” Daud is just one among thousands of Pakistani worker Kabul. Too many skilled and non-skilled workers including doctors, engineers, bankers, chartered accountants are there in Kabul.

According to Pakistan’s Ambassador in Afghanistan Mohammad Sadiq, 100,000 Pakistanis are earning their livelihood in Afghanistan. “People think in Pakistan that only Pakistani Pashtuns are working in Afghanistan. This is totally wrong. Most of the people are from Pakistan’s most populous province of Punjab and other parts of Pakistan,” said Ambassador Sadiq.

On the other side, Pakistani currency is going down that is also a reason that so many Pakistanis are moving to Afghanistan.
Mohammad Ali, a 22-year-old cook, in a restaurant in Kabul, earns about 17,000 Afghanis per month. His looks resemble that of people from the Hazara community and he has no problem working in Kabul.

“I have three brothers and three sisters and my father can’t work at all. I was working in Lahore as a Chinese food chef and was getting 12,000 Pakistani rupees. Now I am getting 17,000 Afghanis which is equal to 32000 Pakistani rupees. My family is happy and I am also happy to work in Kabul. The people are very familiar and they like Chinese food,” said Mohammad Ali.

Besides this some of the Pakistanis are also accepting jobs offer as a challenge to work in a war-torn area.

Afzal Ahmed, 33, is a foods sales manager at Pakistan’s leading conglomerate Engro and has been working in Kabul since 2009. “I accepted this job offer as a challenge because I wanted to gain knowledge and wanted to work hard. People here are friendly and supportive. However, at times when I am stopped by security officials, they will demand a passport, visa and other documents. If you are not a Pakistani and come from any part of the world, they will never disturb you,” said Afzal Ahmed, territory manager, Engro Foods, Afghanistan.

Pakistani workers feel that Kabul is just like their own country. Some of the guys misbehave. But then a lot are supportive as well. But the fact is that Pakistani and Afghan businessmen are working together and running business as good partners.

Umer Ali, 32, who is working in a tailor shop, earns about 10,000 Afghanis. Ali is also provided housing and food. Their shop is known as Sajjad and Shafi Tailoring Shop. Sajjad hails from Pakistan while Shafiq is from Afghanistan. They are running their business together.

“I was working in Peshawar as a tailor and earning 8000 Pakistani rupees because I was working on the basis of how many waist coats pieces have been cut. Then power shortages hamper the work. Power outages had badly hurt business in Peshawar. This was the time when I decided to move somewhere else. I had no money to move out of the country. But then a friend of mine offered me a job as a tailor in Kabul,” said Umer Ali.

Umer goes to Pakistan on a monthly basis for four or five days. His salary is 10,000 Afghanis and when he crosses the border into Torkham, he changes money and gets 19500 Pakistani rupees. Umer has a two-year-old daughter and a wife and mother. “I miss my family but I am happy that I am not too far from Pakistan. I can easily go to Pakistan anytime”

Umer Ali works under the Afghanistan-Pakistan Businessmen’s partnership and he has no problem with it.

The situation of women rights activists in Pakistan

By Shaker Shukraan / Mohammed Arsalan / Bari Baloch

ISLAMABAD: She is soft-spoken and optimistic. She is famous and friendly, even though her life has been one continuous struggle to steer Pakistani women out from the clutches of injustice, discrimination and oppression.

Fouzia Saeed, a PhD from the United States, is one of Pakistan’s strongest voice for women rights.

“It is difficult to become a women rights activist in a country like Pakistan where women cannot move freely like men,” says Dr. Saeed, but “difficult” could never stop her. She says she never accepted those boundaries set by society.

“Discrimination motivated me from my childhood to ask questions such as why girls are always stopped doing works boys are allowed to do.” She was not ready to simply accept that a girl had to be restrained. Why? “Why could I not go out of the house to play like boys? Why could I not attend musical programmes like boys?” For her it was evident; she had to become a women’s right activist.

She recalls when General Ziaul Haq, the then president, visited a college in Peshawar where she was studying Home Economics and she dared to stand up to him and be outrageously courageous. “I accused him of not doing enough for our college.” Recalling it, she says makes her now smile about her own audacity. “I demanded from that very conservative general to allow TV in the girls’ hostels and to resolve some other issues.” She admired Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and let the general feel her anger. “I was so harsh to Ziaul Haq that his guards came up to me and made me sit quietly,” she remembers. Fouzia Saeed has not softened since.

Born in Lahore in 1959, she moved to Peshawar with her slightly liberal parents. She respected them and was not a rebellious daughter. She wore the traditional shawl from head to toe and saw them as necessary agreements with the society around her. Unlike others, she was allowed to go outside on her own. That was bearable.

She was a top scorer in school and received a prestigious scholarship to the United States. Her teachers and fellow students encouraged her to leave Peshawar, and once she agreed there was no looking back from there onwards.

Once in Minnesota, she quickly found herself another cause to meddle in: she acted as the mediator in the rivalry between Palestine and Israeli students on the campus. She has since worked for the United Nations and other international development organisations. But her main cause remains her work on women’s issues, social justice and democracy.
She is currently the director of Mehergarh, an institute committed to transforming the youth of this country. She is also an active member of AASHA, an alliance against sexual harassment at workplace. She is also spearheading a campaign against bonded labour.

The threat of ultra conservative extremism in the region is of utter concern to her. “Threats from conservative elite as well as religious conservatives are a norm now,” she says. “Society’s so-called leaders are always after you. We are called those women who are inspired by the West,” she says, and it seems to frustrate her immensely that she is called “an NGOnised woman; a westernised woman”.

In addition, the urgency to work on anti-Talibanisation has moved her to be a part of a nationwide movement against this vicious process. She identified that Talibanisation has created hurdles in access to women by governments and NGOs alike – due to which women were denied basic rights such as healthcare and education.

She has worked in Pakistan, USA, Bahamas, Philippines, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Thailand, India, Afghanistan, Fiji and several other countries in the Pacific.

Of course, Saeed could not leave the subject of Afghanistan, the country next door where women were suffering badly. She first visited Afghanistan in 1970s before USSR invasion. “It was a different world back then. My family went to Kabul for holidays, believe me, Kabul was like Europe at that time.”

In 2005, her husband got a job in Afghanistan and she again visited Afghanistan. She realised that on this side of the border, there was even more reason to fight for women’s rights. She decided to work for Afghan women as well and joined hands with Afghan NGOs, Muheet Saleem and RAWA, as head of international development organisation and trained activists there.

She knows that it’s a long struggle, on both sides of the border. Even though the situation for women in the Pakistani side is better, much better, women in both sides are facing a long struggle and the road ahead is full of hurdles. But Dr. Saeed is not one to give up her dream: the dream to bring social change to these societies.

**Shaker Shokran** is from Balkh in Afghanistan. He works for Arzoo Radio and TV. He worked for Nehad Radio. His work covers mostly social and cultural topics as well as daily news.

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**Pak-Afghan future inter-linked**

By Bari Baloch

KABUL: After destruction of many years Afghanistan particularly its capital Kabul is fast developing which could be gauged from the lofty buildings, roads, educational institutions, hospitals and media outlets. The decades long war and oppressive regime of Taliban had destroyed almost entire Afghanistan, its infrastructure, educational institutions, hospitals and above all millions of Afghan people were killed while millions of others migrated to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran.

Kabul which is the heartbeat of Afghanistan, centre of politics, commerce and culture was also badly affected not only in Taliban regime but also during Soviet aggression. When Taliban regime was eliminated by United States and it allies in 2001 a new ray of hope created amongst the people of Afghanistan to rebuild their war-torn country with the help of world community. Besides, US, European Union and other countries, Pakistan being neighbouring and sharing 2600 km long border with Afghanistan showed commitment to play a role in the rebuilding and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Since last many years Pakistan has begin a number of development projects in various parts of Afghanistan particularly in education, health and construction of roads. Pakistan is providing $330 million for building of educational and health institutions, and communication infrastructure of Afghanistan.

“Pakistan is playing an important role in the development of Afghanistan since a stable Afghanistan was vital for stable Pakistan,” says Muhammad Sadiq, Pakistan’s ambassador in Kabul. He said some 5,200 Afghans crossed the border into Pakistan everyday in 2009 for business, jobs, medical treatment, education and to visit relatives. “This was significant increase over a year ago when 44,000 Afghans traversed the border daily. Pakistan issues more visas to Afghans than the rest of the world combined and Pakistan does not charge any visa fee from Afghan passport holders,” he said. He said that due to Pakistan’s longstanding policy on educating Afghan nationals some 30,000 Afghans had attended Pakistan universities and colleges in last three decades. “Today, 6,000 afghan students are enrolled in Pakistan’s colleges and universities while half a million Afghan refugee children attend schools in Pakistan.

Pakistan has constructed many educational institutions, including Allama Iqbal Faculty of Humanities at Kabul University costing $10 million was completed in 2009, Rahman Baba High School in Kabul costing $4 million. Some educational institutions have been also constructed in Balkh, Kandahar, Wardak, Baghlan and Herat.

“We have always more expectations from Pakistan to do more particularly in the education sector,” says Fawzia Koofi, a member of Afghan parliament, adding that we knew Pakistan had its own problems but not much had been done in development of Afghanistan on the part of Pakistan which could be visible.
Pakistan has played a role in constructing the Torkham-Jalalabad Road,” says Sediq Sediqi, spokesman of Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry. Sediqi said that development in education and health sectors was crucial but most important for them was security and counterterrorism. “There is a need of strong will among people in both the countries to help each other like when there was earthquake and flood in Pakistan, Afghan government was among the first to help Pakistanis,” he added.

Sediqi said there were conflicts in this region especially between Pakistan and Afghanistan and it is sad that after so many years we have not been able to find a solution to our common problems. Notwithstanding that Pakistan is playing a key role in putting back Afghanistan on the track of development, there are a lot of issues that need to be resolved which are creating a gulf between the two countries.

“We know the people across the border love us and we love them too. But Pakistan is responsible for uprisings in Afghanistan and its destruction,” says Ahmed Zia Neekbin, a professor in Kabul University. Prof. Neekbin said that Pakistan should respect “our borders and completely wind up its interference in Afghanistan” and should prove to be a “responsible neighbour”. Over 100,000 Pakistanis hailing from different sectors mainly labourers are working across Afghanistan particularly in Kabul and playing a significant role in the reconstruction of Kabul and other cities of the country.

Officially, the trade volume between Pakistan and Afghanistan stands at $ 2.6 billion while informal trade is estimated at more than $ 2 billion which is creating over 3.4 million jobs in Pakistan. Afghanistan is a tremendous market for Pakistani economy as it allows Pakistani goods and products to be widely available. Political analysts on both sides of the border believe that peace is essential for the regional prosperity and Pakistan, being a developed country, as compared to Afghanistan, should play a significant role in the process of development of their Afghan brothers.

Over 80 percent of Afghans seek medical treatment in Pakistan

Pakistan and Afghanistan share not only a border but history, culture, religion and societal structure too. Both countries are severely hit by corruption and their media has gained much independence and credibility during the past 10 years. In this scenario, it is widely believed that Afghan journalists can follow footsteps of their fellows in Pakistan where most important among recently unveiled corruption cases is considered Malik Riaz’s media gate in which the son of Chief Justice of Pakistan is said to have taken money from Malik Riaz to give favourable decisions from the Supreme Court.

“Malik Riaz case proved that the media can hold the judiciary and even itself accountable,” says Javed Chaudhry, columnist and anchorperson working with Express media group. “This case, along with missing persons’ case has established impartiality and credibility of the media in its fight against corruption.”

Chaudhry feels, like many others in country, that the media in Pakistan has become free and fair during the last decade. “The Pakistani media has covered the journey of 100 years in just 10, but their curiosity and thrust for revelation does not end and that is what drives the media.”

Pakistan media flourished during the last 10 years and the same was the case with Afghanistan. But the question remains whether Pakistani newsmen can become role models for their Afghan counterparts in fighting corruption or not.

Chaudhry is optimistic in this regard too. “Pakistan and Afghanistan have a common culture, history and social fabric hence the media can play the same role in Afghan society that it played in Pakistan.”

Ground conditions in Pakistan and Afghanistan are different. Weak political structure, a vulnerable security situation, foreign occupation and economic instability have their impact on every walk of life in our neighbourhood. For the media too, there is no exception to the rule and Afghan media’s economic reliance on foreign aid is regarded as the biggest hidden threat.

Muhammad Malick, resident editor of The News in Islamabad, says that the pouring in of foreign aid in Afghanistan changes the scenario. “Economic independence is the biggest
factor in the growth of the media in Pakistan. The private sector here has become strong enough during these years to invest in the media and to get it out of state control," he said. Decreasing the media’s reliance on advertisement from the state has given it a chance to become strong and independent. “A decade ago, the media was getting 70-75% of its advertisement from the government and only 25-30% from the private sector, but now the equation has reserved,” Malick explains.

“The Afghan media is very young and immature. It is not in their capacity to reveal scandals like the media in Pakistan does,” said Afghan journalist Harun Najafizada.

“A lot of scandals, like the Kabul Bank one, came from the foreign media after which the Afghan media picked it up. The reason is that sources in Afghanistan are not helpful. They prefer to talk to foreign journalists.” Najafizada claims that the media in Afghanistan has more potential than the foreign media, provided if it is given time to saturate. “We know the culture, the language and can easily become friends with the sources,” he added.

Lacunas exist on Pakistani media’s part too. Most notable is its inability to hold itself accountable and to resist pressure coming from owners of media groups. Mostly journalists succumb to the threats coming from political factions or sometimes they willingly tilt towards yellow journalism and file tabled stories or host planted shows on TV.

Matiullah Jan, a senior journalist, tried to highlight the irregularities and corruption within the media but he was stopped due to immense pressure by the owners of media houses and even some journalists associations. “Pakistani media is unable to hold itself accountable,” he said, adding that the media crosses its limits while giving stories to the judiciary to take notice of.

“The media and judiciary are interdependent, both went overboard while using each other to increase their strength,” Jan said. “But even then the Pakistani media can become a model for Afghanistan to eradicate corruption – provided it focuses more on journalistic investigation and produces evidence over mere allegations.”

Kabul’s ravaged heritage

By Haris Bin Aziz

“This is a good place to visit. Babur was a king of Afghans as well as Indians so restoring and maintaining this kind of places can bring people of this region closer.” These were the sentiments of Zalmai, a visitor at the tomb of Emperor Babur in Kabul’s historic gardens.

Bagh-e-Babur is probably the easiest place for the visitors to reach among those which carry historical significance in this ancient city. Thought to have been built around 1528AD, the gardens remained hostage to Afghan civil war before recent restoration in 2002. Omar Mirkhail, an old man from the administration, repeats the whole story fluently. “This was a military camp of Ahmed Shah Masud and Gulbuddin Hikmatyar’s forces were outside. Heavy firing and shelling destroyed everything except the graves and Quranic carvings on the gravestone of Gauhar-un-Nisa, daughter of Alamgir, buried on the right side of her great grandfather. The left side is occupied by Babur’s son Hindal and grandson Hakim.” The gardens also house the palace of Amir Abdur Rehman Khan near Shah Jahani Mosque made of white marble.

Visible from the gardens is Kabul Wall at the top of a nearby mountain. This 5th century structure is now surrounded at the bottom by hundreds of inhabitants leaving no way to touch the height. “Right at the top of hill, fort of Amir Sher Ali Khan is still intact but not reachable,” Bagh-e-Babur’s gatekeeper Roohullah points his finger towards hilltop. This 12-feet thick and 20-feet high asset stands ruined.

The wall starts from Qila-e-Bala Hisar, a historic fort built along with it. Site of fierce fighting during first and second Anglo-Afghan wars in 19th century, Bala Hisar again became focal point of conflict between Masud and Hikmatyar forces during civil war. Manned by 55th division of Afghan National Army today, the historic fort is closed for public and apparently is in a state of disrepair.

“Mujahideen, not Taliban destroyed Kabul. They changed the map of city,” says professor of social sciences at Kabul university Ahmed Zia Nekdin. “Government is trying to rebuild the monuments but people are not satisfied with the work progress,” Nekdin commented. Sitting in a new faculty building gifted by Pakistan government, Professor Nekdin also recounted that the university was founded in 1931 and renovated after 2001. “It was almost completely destroyed during Soviet invasion and civil war. During the Taliban regime, the university was open but no woman teacher or student was allowed to enter here. A beard was necessary for every male and the wearing of tie was not allowed.”

A large blue dome in the centre of old Kabul indicates Pul-e-Khishiti Mosque. Architecture of this big mosque is simple with no carvings except on an exterior wall. Situated besides the River Kabul, this 18th century worship place is still alive after getting damaged during the civil war. Rebuilt by King Zahir Shah in late 1960s and renovated after 2001, the mosque is thronged by worshippers and visited by a large number of labourers taking nap in the afternoon. “We are here to take some rest before we again go to our work,” says one of
The tomb gets opened only for the dignitaries. You will have to take a permission letter from the Afghan foreign ministry to enter,” says an Afghan policeman deployed at the mausoleum of King Nadir Shah (1883-1933), located at another hilltop. Nadir Shah ruled from 1929 till his assassination by a teenager. Cordoned off from all sides, this tomb is now a national monument. Though rebuilt recently, the tomb has already fallen prey to the deterioration due to governmental negligence.

Out of palaces, most important is the Dar-ul-Aman Palace of King Amanullah Khan (1892-1960) who ruled the Kingdom of Afghanistan from 1919 to 1929. Built in early 1920s, this abode of Aman(ullah) can also mean abode of peace but now it is ruined by series of wars. Located more than 15 kilometres outside of the city centre, this damaged building stands near Tajbeg Palace built as the residence of King Amanullah and his family. More of a picnic spot for the royal family, the palace was occupied by President Hafizullah Amin when on 27 December 1979, Soviet forces invaded and killed him in Operation Storm 333. Outstanding landmarks of fine architecture, both palaces are planned to be rebuilt and used by the Afghan parliament but a chronic shortage of funds hinders the restoration.

Breathing in the shadows of great Hindu Kush mountains, Kabul, nearly 3,500 years old, has hosted a number of dynasties and remained point of attraction for several invaders over the centuries due to its strategic location. But unfortunately, the historic city with unmatched beauty and charm has been more destroyed than embellished. Now there are a few historical places and most of them are either ravaged or nearing destruction. More ironical is the fact that the present Afghan government is not only ignoring restoration of its national assets but also making many of these places less accessible or completely forbidden to visit for the tourists.
An assistant professor of the University of Peshawar, Irfan Ashraf, said, “Looking into the existing scenario, it is important to arrest every opportunity contributing to economic development in the bordering areas.” He said the policy to fight the menace of militancy through development has long remained a distant dream. “So far, underdevelopment has added to black economy, which facilitated Taliban and criminal groups to sponsor anarchy in Federally Administered Tribal Areas,” Ashraf added.

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Malik Safdar Dawar is ex-president of the Tribal Union of Journalist (TUJ-FATA).

Bismillah Arman is a journalist from Khost, Afghanistan.
that are off limits, and interfering with health care is one of them. Attacks on health-care staff, vehicles and facilities cannot be considered part of the ordinary conduct of war. Health care must remain available to everyone who needs it. It must be provided impartially, on the basis of medical considerations only.”

But the spokesperson of the Afghan interior ministry rejects these negative predictions about the future of Afghanistan. "Our neighbours can play an important role in the restoration of peace in Afghanistan if they come forward and assist us faithfully".

Malik Achakzai is a freelance journalist based in Quetta, Pakistan. He reports for the Pashto-service of Voice of America (VoA) and as a Service-Writer at policymic.com. He is interested in humanity and religion and his stories often deal with issues like terrorism, militancy, politics and social problems.