

AFGHAN WOMEN FEAR OPPRESSION AS MISSION ENDS

KABUL: No one ever claimed responsibility after a suicide bomber rammed into the vehicle of celebrated female parliamentarian Shukria Barakzai. She walked away from the wreckage after the Nov 16 blast that killed three civilians and wounded 20. The Taliban often take responsibility for suicide bombings. They did so for one against the British embassy that killed six people days later. Barakzai, 42, said Afghanistan's spy agency had warned her before about threats to her life from the insurgents. But an investigation into the attack on the outspoken women's rights activist has led nowhere.

Barakzai has no shortage of potential enemies, including powerful warlords. "Our parliament is a collection of lords," Barakzai once famously said. "Warlords, drug lords, crime lords." Barakzai was only a few hundred metres from the Parliament building, her destination, when the suicide bomber rammed into her armoured car. A strong supporter of new President Ashraf Ghani, Barakzai had been talked about as a candidate to join his government, perhaps as education or women's affairs minister. Ghani has promised he will appoint four women to his cabinet.

Barakzai, who rose to prominence when she ran underground schools for girls when the Taliban

ruled the country, says both the previous Afghan government and its Western benefactors have failed to defend the hard-won rights of women. "For me, what they do to support women's rights is just lip service, nothing more than that," says Barakzai, interviewed in hospital where she was recovering from burns to the left side of her face and her left hand from the attack.

Quotas for Women

The US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to oust the Taliban, and stayed on, in part to build a Western-style democracy, including legal safeguards for women. A quota was mandated for women in public offices, such as parliament and provincial councils. Earlier this year, however, conservative lawmakers rolled back the quota for women in provincial councils to 20 per cent from 25 per cent.

Last Sunday marked the formal end to the international combat mission in Afghanistan. And while progress has been made getting millions of girls in school and putting women in positions of authority, it has had "frustratingly little impact on these power dynamics," the U.N.-backed Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit said in a recent report. "Today, women's rights are ... one of the feared losses shared

by Afghans and the world as international troops prepare to withdraw completely."

World Bank data show Afghanistan still lags far behind even its impoverished neighbours in South Asia. Only 16 percent of Afghan females above the age of 15 were active in the labour force compared with 57 percent in Bangladesh and 27 percent in India. The fertility rate in Afghanistan is 7.2 births per woman versus 3.1 for all of South Asia. Only 14 percent of births in Afghanistan are attended by a skilled health worker compared with 36 percent in South Asia. The literacy rate for 15-24 year-old women was 32 percent compared with 63 percent in neighbouring Pakistan.

University for Girls

Barakzai, a parliamentarian the past decade, has campaigned against the practice of Afghan men marrying multiple wives; her husband, who runs an oil company, took a second wife without consulting her. She stresses the need for long-term investment in education to compete seriously for jobs instead of aid programmes for "workshops or seminars." "If you see their projects, they are always the same. Empowering women by a seminar or workshop. Or embroidery, tailoring," she laughs. "I am tired of these

things. "We need a university for girls," she says, due to the fact that many families will not send girls to mixed institutions.

Women's activists have been lukewarm about a \$216 million United States Agency for International Development (USAID) program to support women's advancement. The five-year program, called Promote, aims to help thousands of women gain business and management skills and promote women's rights groups. Noor Safi Gululai, one of the few women in Afghanistan's High Peace Council, which is in charge of the so-far fruitless effort to convince the Taliban to join peace talks, was critical of such efforts. "I am afraid this money will also go in the pockets of a few people," Gululai told Reuters. "Rights will never be taught at conferences. I hope the president will talk to USAID and have them use the money to establish good schools and universities."

The US Embassy in Kabul said its new program would encourage lasting change. "Promote will be a long-term, sustained effort to help women obtain more leadership positions in government and business," an embassy statement said on Wednesday, adding that activities "will be designed by Afghan women, for Afghan women." — Reuters

FRENCH CEREMONY MARKS END OF AFGHAN MISSION

KABUL: The last French troops in Afghanistan held a ceremony in Kabul yesterday to mark the end of their deployment after NATO combat operations closed down and as a new "train and support" mission takes over. About 150 French soldiers who had been helping run the military airport handed over responsibility to a Turkish unit which will operate under the new NATO mission. NATO's war in Afghanistan formally ended on Sunday, when the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was replaced by the US-led follow-up mission "Resolute Support".

France, which withdrew all its combat troops from the country two years ago, lost 89 soldiers and saw 700 injured in the war since 2001. The conflict against the Taliban still rages across Afghanistan, and an estimated 17,000 foreign soldiers will stay on to assist the local police and army, who face a major challenge as the international military presence declines.

"The threat is still present, insurgents continue to be active, but what has been accomplished in 13 years is considerable in terms of governance, development, security," said General Gratien Maire, second in command of the French military. The soldiers could leave with "the satisfaction of a duty well done" he said. The foreign force next year will consist of the 12,500-strong NATO mission, most of them US troops, and a US counter-terrorism operation outside the NATO remit, though final numbers remain unclear.

Rising Casualties

The Taliban issued another statement yesterday celebrating the end of NATO's combat mission, adding that no peace talks could happen before all foreign troops leave. "Today, they are evacuating their invading forces from Afghanistan while they are bitterly defeated by the just and pious Afghan resistance," the group said. "The real solution of the ongoing Afghan crisis is in the complete and unconditional withdrawal of all for-

eign forces from this country. "The presence of foreign occupiers is main cause of instability and chaos."

The Taliban, who ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, have waged a resilient insurgency against NATO and Afghan forces, with violence now at record levels nationwide. The United Nations said civilian casualties hit a new high this year with about 10,000 non-combatants killed or wounded - 75 percent of them by the Taliban. Insurgents launched high-profile strikes in the capital during the closing weeks of the ISAF era, targeting foreign guest houses, diplomatic convoys, the French cultural centre and Afghan army buses.

The end of NATO's combat mission brought "the longest war in American history... to a responsible conclusion", US President Barack Obama said. Afghan officials and senior US officers have been pushing Obama to extend US involvement. US troop numbers are set to halve within 12 months and fall to almost nothing in two years. President Ashraf Ghani hopes to bring peace to Afghanistan after decades of conflict, saying he is open to talks with any insurgent group.

Since 2001 billions of dollars of aid have been spent in Afghanistan on new schools, hospitals, roads and promoting women's rights. But corruption has been endemic and progress limited, even in the cities. This year's presidential election, which was meant to be the keystone legacy of the development effort, was marred by fraud and a prolonged standoff between the two poll rivals that fanned further unrest. At Kabul airport, French soldiers handed a flag to their Turkish successors at an event attended by Afghan officers who will eventually take over the facility. A memorial in the shape of the Eiffel Tower commemorating the French war dead was also unveiled. Afghan security forces will hold celebrations on Thursday marking the complete transfer of responsibility from NATO. — AFP



KABUL: General Gratien Maire, second in command of the French military inspects the last French troops in Afghanistan during their end of NATO mission ceremony at Kabul International Airport (KAIA) in Kabul yesterday. — AFP



MIRPUR, Pakistan: In this photograph taken on Oct 25, 2014, 30-year-old Pakistani mother Ghazla Kauser holds her daughter Maryam as she gives an interview at her home in Mirpur. (Right) In this photo taken Oct 26, 2014, 26-year-old Pakistani mother Zara Bibi poses with a photograph of her son, who is in his father's custody in Britain, at her residence. — AFP

MURDER SPOTLIGHTS POLYGAMY AMONG BRITISH PAKISTANIS

MANY BRIDES ABANDONED, FACE BLEAK FUTURE

MIRPUR, Pakistan: Pakistani police are investigating whether a jealous wife ordered the recent murder of an elderly British man in Kashmir, in a case that spotlights polygamy among dual nationals in the region. Jumma Khan, 70, was shot on the doorstep of his home in Mirpur, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, the ancestral hometown of much of Britain's large Pakistani community. Khan's family claim the second of his three wives - who was in England at the time - arranged the October hit.

Senior police official Raja Azhar Iqbal told AFP that Khan's eldest son from his marriage to his second wife, as well as two of the wife's brothers, have been arrested and bailed in connection with the killing. "We are investigating the case on two aspects, property and love jealousy," Iqbal said. "We have not reached any firm conclusions but it is likely that his third marriage could be the reason for his death."

Weddings, Rivalries

Khan's matrimonial career began when he married his cousin Fatima Bibi in 1963, fathering six children, who live in Britain. In 1981 he divorced her and married Zubaida Bibi, having four more children with her. Then, in May, he took another wife - Asia Bibi, 40, from the garrison city of Rawalpindi. It was at this point friends say Khan began to fear for his safety.

Neighbours say Khan, who lived in the northern town of Wakefield in Britain, used to go to mosque for prayers five times a day when he was in Kashmir, but after his latest marriage was rarely seen outdoors. His younger brother Haji Mohammad Ilyas, who arrived in Kashmir from

Britain after the murder, said Khan was a pious man with no obvious enemies in Pakistan. "When he returned to Britain after his third marriage, his relations with his second wife worsened. He quit his house in the UK and started living with a friend," he told AFP.

Shakeel Hussain Jumma, 40, Khan's son from his first marriage, said his father had developed "serious differences" with his second wife. "During a family function in Britain, people heard his second wife making veiled threats to him," Jumma said. Mohammad Imran, the eldest son from Khan's second marriage who has been bailed over the murder, vehemently denied his side of the family had anything to do with the killing. "We are innocent. We are not involved in the murder of our father," the 28-year-old told AFP.

Plight

Islam permits men to take up to four wives and while polygamy is illegal in Britain, in practice there is little the authorities can do to prevent people taking additional spouses in ceremonies overseas. It is not uncommon for elderly, well-off British Pakistani men to take additional wives from Mirpur, with the promise of British nationality. According to lawyer Mohammad Yasin, who deals with such cases, the women often face a bleak future, with many husbands not returning to Pakistan after going back to England.

The husbands typically spend a few months with their new wives before abandoning them. In most cases they do not maintain contact and, in some, the wives give birth to children who

then do not see their fathers. Ghazla Kauser, 30 is one such case. She married 37-year-old Chaudhry Amraz Khan four years ago. He spent three months with his wife and then went back to England. Kauser was pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl named Mariam, now three years old. "She always asks about her father, but I have nothing to tell her. He has no contact with us," said Kauser, tears rolling down her cheeks.

In a highly conservative Islamic society like Pakistan, tongues wag about mothers with absent husbands, and Kauser says she has had a tough time. "I went to my in-laws in my husband's home town, but they treated me badly and kicked me out of the house," she said. Another Kashmiri girl Zara Bibi, 26, says she married a British national in 2001, at the age of just 13 - illegal in both countries. "My husband did not meet the legal requirements for me to get British nationality, so they sent me back to Pakistan, deceiving me that my mother was ill," she said. "Now I cannot go back to England to see my son. My son is now nine years old," Bibi told AFP.

Mohammad Yasin, the lawyer, said the problem extended to hundreds of women in the region. The British High Commission in Islamabad said it was providing consular assistance to Khan's family over the murder. But officials said the "tragic" issue of wives abandoned by their husbands was beyond their remit. "It is difficult to offer any practical assistance to the victims since it often involves Pakistani nationals in their own country and is therefore very much a matter for the local authorities," a spokeswoman said. — AFP

AFGHAN MOUNTAIN HAMLET PROVING GROUND FOR ARMY

DANGAM, Afghanistan: The smoke from mortar and rocket attacks rises from the mountains of Dangam in the remote eastern border region of Afghanistan as Taliban insurgents battle government forces in a bid to establish a permanent presence now that the American soldiers who led the fight here for more than a decade have left. Heavy fighting has been raging for almost three weeks, with wave after wave of Taliban militants assaulting this picturesque but poverty-stricken district of Kunar province just four kilometers from the border with Pakistan, officials and residents said.

The US-led international effort to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban officially shifts from a combat to a training band support mission yesterday, with Afghan forces assuming full responsibility for security nationwide on New Year's Day. A residual force of 10,800 Americans and almost 3,000 NATO soldiers will remain, under the banner of a new mission called Resolute Support.

Over the last 18 months, US and NATO forces have been closing their bases across the country,

taking their battlefield prowess, air support and medical evacuation assets with them. The war is meanwhile creeping into urban and residential areas, putting ordinary people at greater risk. Civilian casualties look set to hit 10,000 in 2014, the highest yearly total of dead and wounded since the UN began keeping records in 2008. More than 75 percent of the deaths and injuries are caused by Taliban attacks, according to the U.N.

There are few places where Afghan forces have been tested as ferociously as in Dangam, a forested valley where life has changed little for centuries. The fighting began when local residents decided they had had enough of the Taliban, who had set up a "shadow" administration and were attempting to take control of the valley, according to Gen. Mohammad Zaman Waziri, Afghan army corps commander for eastern Afghanistan.

The Afghan army came to help, he said, and fighting has been going on ever since. Up to 550 families have been forced from their homes, and more than 40 houses have been destroyed, Kunar

governor Sheja-ul Mulk Jalala said. Tribal elder Haji Muzamel said another 800 families have been pinned down by the fighting. "The terrorists have very important goals in Dangam, such as establishing permanent bases or transferring their bases from the other side of the border, crushing the local people's uprising and of course creating problems for Afghan security forces," said Haseb Sediqi, spokesman for the National Security Directorate intelligence agency.

Officials said that since early December more than 1,000 heavily armed insurgents have turned up here, including members of the Pakistani Taliban, or TTP, and Lashkar-e-Taiba, the group responsible for the attacks on the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008 in which more than 160 people were killed. The TTP said it was behind the attack this month on a school in Peshawar, in northern Pakistan, in which more than 140 people were killed, most of them children. It is not unusual for Pakistani fighters - usually referred to by Afghan officials as simply "foreigners" - to fight alongside the Afghan Taliban. — AP



DANGAM, Afghanistan: In this Dec 24, 2014 photo, an Afghan National Army soldier prays during an ongoing operation in this district of Kunar province. — AP