



# Legislative Newsletter

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## NEWS

### **Minister Meets Wolesi Jirga to Discuss Pilgrimage Problems.**

The Wolesi Jirga (WJ) plenary on 6 September, expressed concern over the problems faced by Afghan pilgrims embarking on the Hajj. The Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs, Mohammad Yousaf Naizi attended the session in which members made it clear that the challenges of last year should not be suffered by Afghan Hajjis.

As Hajj is the “fifth pillar of Islam,” every year thousands of Afghans travel to Saudi Arabia to visit holy places and participate in religious ceremonies. According to Minister Niazi, this year 35,000 Hajjis will fly to Saudi Arabia from Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar provinces. “This year we have pre-planned and we have taken necessary steps to make the process convenient,” he said. The Minister advised that a delegation was sent to Saudi Arabia to reserve buildings close to Mecca and coordinate services such as transportation and accommodation with the Saudi government. He also explained the process of hiring teachers and selecting airlines for Hajjis, and said the accommodation fee for the pilgrims has noticeably decreased compared to last year.

Some legislators remained skeptical despite the Minister’s optimism. “Every year the ministry is hopeful that the process of Hajj is fair, but last year we saw Afghan pilgrims endure a lot of problems due to administrative inadequacies,” MP Mowlawee Abdul Aziz (Badakhshan) said. He further added, “The services of travel agencies are not consistent. The ministry claims that they have reserved buildings close to Mecca but they are not close. Also, who guarantees that the teachers are qualified?”

MP Abdul Salam Ghazi Zada (Herat), who last year traveled to Mecca, recounted the difficulties that faced Hajjis. “Our prices are high compared to neighboring countries,” he said. “Last year we saw the Hajjis from Pakistan and other countries, whose services were convincing.”

MP Ali Akbar Qasimi (Ghazni) said that potential pilgrims who were not selected for the Hajj have in some cases not had their deposit money refunded due to the crisis at Kabul Bank. Added to that, the

value of the deposits had fluctuated leading to losses of about 9,000 Afghans for the few who have received their deposit refund.

Speaker Mohammad Younus Qanooni concluded the session by noting that last year's services, including transportation, accommodation, education and other facilities, were of a poor quality. In recent years, some high ranking government officials have been fired or detained for corruption or dereliction of duties related to the planning of the Hajj process.

### **Meshrano Jirga Members Criticize Appointments to the High Council for Peace.**

Senators in the Meshrano Jirga (MJ) plenary on 5 October criticized some appointments to the newly established High Council for Peace, with some members warning the government that those leaders with blood on their hands cannot bring peace and stability to the country.

The government on 28 September announced the names of 70 members of the High Council for Peace tasked with approaching the Taliban and laying the foundation for further negotiations. The new council includes some high-level jihadi leaders, former Taliban, tribal leaders and some politically active women from across the country. Jihadi leaders in the council include former president Burhanudin Rabbani, Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf, Haji Mohammad Mohaqqueq and Mohammad Ismail Khan; all are well known as key players in the 1992-1996 civil war and resistance to the Taliban from 1996 to 2001.

Burhanudin Rabbani's appointment as Head of the High Council for Peace stirred controversy among MJ members. Voicing his opposition to Rabbani's appointment, Speaker Sebghatullah Mujadidi said "I will seriously follow this issue, and will never leave this position to Rabbani," he said. "If the government wants to use force, then I will leave Afghanistan." Mujadidi further added that any leader with a blemished background or a history of "mistakes" should be told to sit quietly. "The Taliban have also denied they will talk with such people (former Jihadi leaders) who do not believe in peace," Mujadidi said.

However, some members disagreed with Mujadidi's sentiment. Mawlawee Mahmood Danishjo (Balkh) said, "The leaders should not quarrel over the leadership, this will create problems for the people." He further noted that no single leader is responsible for the civil war, saying that neighboring countries were meddling in Afghan issues which caused warfare in the country. "The fighting is still continuing in Afghanistan. Should we say that President Karzai is responsible for all these disasters?" Danishjo asked.

According to a government press statement, the formation of the High Council for Peace is a significant step in the peace and reconciliation process, and was initially recommended to President Karzai by the National Consultative Peace Jirga in June. However, some MJ members criticized the formation of the council without consulting the National Assembly.

Rafiullah Haidari (Kunar) angrily said that the National Assembly had been ignored. “President Karzai did not consult the representatives of the people because it is a government project and we should not discuss the issue inside the Meshrano Jirga,” he added.

In a press statement, the Taliban rejected the High Council of Peace and called its establishment a process merely for changing public opinion.

### **Senators Ask for Better Management of Water Resources.**

Senators have called on the government to better manage water resources by building retaining walls, solving major water disputes and other challenges to the future development of the country. Most of Afghanistan’s water flows abroad, but substantial issues regarding border rivers currently remain unsolved.

The Meshrano Jirga (MJ) on 10 October convened with Minister of Finance Hazrat Omer Zakhilwal, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aklil Hakimi, and Deputy Minister of Water and Energy Eng. Shujaudin Ziaye, who were questioned by Senators on the construction and rehabilitation of dams, consolidation of river banks and water issues with neighboring countries.

According to some Senators, due to a lack of retaining walls, river overflow destroys thousands of hectares of lands every year, and affects people, animals, forests and homes. Also, they said residents in some provinces suffer from water shortages while Afghanistan’s rivers flow into neighboring countries like Iran, Pakistan and Turkmenistan.

Reading the members’ notes, Deputy Secretary of the MJ Najiba Hussaini (Daikundi) said, “The Amu River affects five provinces every year. As well as swallowing close-by villages, frontier borders are also uncertain.”

She named several dam projects that Senators felt were proceeding slowly or where construction was yet to begin: “Construction work on water dams in Salma, Paktia, Nawa and Kamal Khan is going very slowly. The government has to seriously manage water resources—the people of Nimroz Province are unable to find drinking water but Iran uses the Helmand River for irrigation of their lands.”

On the topic of international cooperation, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aklil Hakimi, said, “As per international protocols signed between Afghanistan and neighboring countries, whenever we have the financial ability to build retaining walls and dams we can facilitate this through a coordination committee.”

The government of Afghanistan has repeatedly said that although it has surveyed some sites for dams, it does not have enough money to build retaining walls and implement major projects. “Building medium-size dams is the priority of the government and we have finalized the geological survey for some dams. But the river in Kunar Province flows to a neighboring country—we don’t have enough money for construction of retaining walls and dams and donors are not interested in it,” said Minister of Finance Omer Zakhelwal.

However, a number of Senators questioned the government’s commitment to managing rivers and said that lack of funds is just an excuse, citing large amounts received from the international community. “No infrastructure projects have been implemented. The government says, ‘we don’t have funds,’ which is not true. We have funds, but they go to personal pockets, and are not being spent for the welfare of people,” Mukaram Khan (Laghman) said.

Explaining the importance of water and climate change, Deputy Minister of Water and Energy, Eng. Shujaudin Ziaye, said, “Infrastructure projects must be taken seriously. Neighboring countries have controlled our rivers, if we don’t control our waters, with climate changes we will face more problems.”

Eng. Ziaye also added that the Ministry of Water and Energy has three fundamental programs: reconstruction projects, amendment of previous studies, and construction of new projects. He said the ministry has started work on 3,300 small projects but insisted more money is needed for major infrastructure projects.

## **Committee News**

Meshrano Jirga

**Committee of Health, Welfare, Environment, Martyrs and disabled:** Committee met on October 4 to consider complaints submitted by families of the martyred. The families of the martyred complained about insufficient allowances they receive every month. They claimed the allowances do not cover their day to day needs. They further complained about ill-treatment they suffer at the hands of Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD) officials. The Committee resolved to send the complaints to MoLSAMD for resolution.

The Committee further considered environmental challenges faced by most municipalities. In their view, there is a need for a media campaign to conscientize the youth on the importance of conserving the environment. To pursue the issue further, members decided to invite the Head of Department National Environment, Director of Kabul Municipality and the Director of Property in Kabul Municipality to the next meeting.

**Women Affairs Committee:** The committee discussed issues related to women's shelters. In the Committee's view, there is a need for shelters for women fleeing domestic violence. Concern was however raised on lack of security in these shelters. Members were in agreement that there should be concerted efforts to protect these shelters and that only a few organizations must be aware of the location of the shelters. Additionally, no men should be allowed to access the shelters and all women seeking refuge in shelters should be put through a rigorous screening exercise to ensure that only the deserving are accommodated.

The women's committee is currently considering holding a public hearing on women's shelters. The hearing initially scheduled for the 27<sup>th</sup> of October has been postponed to a date to be determined.

**Economic, Budget and Finance Committee:** On October 4, 2010, the Meshrano Jirga Budget and Finance Committee, chaired by Senator Maulwi Urfaan, received a technical briefing on budget related issues from APAP's Budget Support Team (BST). The briefing is one of several briefings designed to empower commissions with key information to improve scrutiny of the budget and other government programs and projects.

The meeting, attended by four other members of the committee, was first briefed on the current status of the health sector, health sector budget trend from 1382-1388 (2003- 2010), and the major challenges faced by the health sector. Also, the BST shared information on ongoing health sector programs and projects in some selected provinces. Secondly, as part of efforts to prepare for the 1390 (2011) national budget, the committee was also briefed on provincial budgeting and provincial priorities for 2011. The provincial information was gathered by the APAP Budget Support Team during recent visits to Balkh, Bamyan, Herat and Nangarhar provinces.

Following the presentations, the committee members asked several questions relating to the national health programs, health strategic plans, provincial development plans and provincial priorities. The APAP Budget Team adequately responded to the committee members questions.

On behalf of the committee, Mr. Maulwi Urfaan expressed his appreciation of the presentations and requested APAP to continue providing similar information to the committee.

### **Legislation**

There is no legislative activity to report at this time.

### **Upcoming Events:**

Meshrano Jirga

- Economic, Budget and Finance Committee: Pre budget discussion on Agricultural Sector: 16 October at Economic, Budget and Finance Committee meeting hall
- MJ delegates reports to the plenary on recent provincial visits – 17 October
- IPU delegates report to the plenary – 17 October
- Committee reports to the plenary – 19 October
- Public Hearing by Health committee on this issues of the disabled - 20 October 2010

Wolesi Jirga

- Minister of Rural Development to present his Ministry's Annual Report to plenary – 16 October
- Council of Chairs meeting - 17 October
- Minister of Agriculture to present his Ministry's annual report to plenary - 18 October

### **Acronyms**

APAP BST	APAP Budget Support Team
IPU	Inter Parliamentary Union
MJ	Meshrano Jirga
MoLSAMD	Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled
NA	National Assembly
WJ	Wolesi Jirga