



Legislative Newsletter

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NEWS

WJ Takes MRRD Minister to Task

Discussion during the Wolesi Jirga (WJ) plenary session held on 16 October was dominated by the issue of technical experts leaving the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and the apparent slowdown in reconstruction efforts in rural areas as a result. Minister Jarullah Mansoori was in attendance on behalf of MRRD.

After listening to the Minister's progress report, Members of Parliament (MPs) questioned his management capacity. "Since you were appointed as MRRD minister, the work of MRRD has almost stopped," claimed Ms. Fawzia Kofi (Badakhshan). One MP went further and threatened Mr. Mansoori with a no-confidence vote. "Almost 99 percent of the MPs are not happy with the work of MRRD at the moment. You should try to improve, or we will consider passing a vote of no confidence in you," said Fatima Aziz (Kunduz). A vote of no confidence seems unlikely, however, given that the WJ has not been able to form the required quorum in recent weeks. Nonetheless, the statement underlined the seriousness that MPs attach to the matter.

Responding to MPs' concerns, Minister Mansoori defended his record at the helm of the MRRD and rejected claims that a "brain drain" was debilitating the ministry's performance. "Those who have been sacked from MRRD were not 'experts' but corrupt officials. I have fought tooth and nail to get rid of corruption. I have even been threatened with death because of my unwavering stance against it (corruption)," he said, before pointing out that international donors continued to show faith in MRRD.

However, Sultan Mohammad Awrang (Badakhshan) was unconvinced. "No doubt corruption exists at the MRRD," he said, "but your achievements have been small compared with [former minister] Ihsan Ziya. Since your appointment as MRRD minister, no project in Badakhshan Province has been completed."

It was not all negative for the Minister, however, as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), which is run by MRRD, was praised by MPs.

Senators Express Concern over Security in Kandahar Province

On 17 October, Meshrano Jirga members expressed their concern over the worsening security situation in Kandahar Province. Several civilians were killed and more wounded as five explosions occurred in Kandahar City on the previous day; these included attacks on the prison and police headquarters.

One legislator representing the province, Bismilah Afghanmal, lamented the ongoing violence and questioned the logic of increasing military activity in Kandahar. “I think bombardments and operations are not the solution. The government established the High Council for Peace but the security forces have launched more operations,” he said.

Some Senators agreed that since the High Council for Peace has been established to seek reconciliation, violence needs to be halted. “The fighting and operations should be stopped as a sign of peace; peace will never come through propaganda,” Hajji Mukaram Khan Nasiri (Laghman) told Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Project (APAP).

The High Council for Peace was inaugurated by President Hamid Karzai and held its first meeting on 13 October. However, to date the Meshrano Jirga has not officially supported it. A request to back the council made by Deputy Speaker Fazal Hadi Muslimyar was met with a lukewarm response in the plenary last week, with some Senators making their support for the Peace Council conditioned upon its performance.

“Let’s see their activities. It’s too early to raise green cards or hands of approval for the High Council for Peace,” said Rafiullah Haidari (Kunar).

Lower House Quizzes Education Minister

Education Minister, Farooq Wardak, briefed the Wolesi Jirga during its plenary session held on 13 October regarding the Ministry’s progress in improving education outcomes in Afghanistan.

Making a case that the Ministry of Education (MoE) has made progress, Minister Wardak cited a variety of statistics comparing Afghanistan’s education system today with that of nine years ago. For example, he explained that school enrollment has risen from one million to 6.8 million students during this period. The Minister was hopeful that these numbers would continue to grow, with approximately 500 schools being constructed each year, including 120 schools constructed by the government and international donors funding the remainder. However, he warned that the MoE’s current budget allocation was inadequate, lacking funds for up to 37,000 teachers. He urged the house to consider the MoE’s pressing needs when debating next year’s budget.

Following his presentation, Mohammad Iqbal Safi (Kapisa) queried whether Islamic tuition has been reduced in the national curriculum, while Mohammad Noor Akbari (Daikundi) and Hajji Mohammad Abdoh (Balkh) complained of a lack of education facilities in their respective provinces. Also, Ali Akbar Qasimi (Ghazni) and Qadriya Yazdan Parast (Kabul) both alleged that MoE officials had campaigned for election candidates in their provinces even though such officials should remain impartial.

Responding to the legislators’ questions, Minister Wardak explained that religious subjects have not been reduced in the curriculum. However, he acknowledged that a large number of schools were yet to be constructed, explaining that tents have been provided in the meantime. He added that any complaints relating to the election should be initially directed to the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC). The Minister concluded by saying that the salary adjustment process for teachers was underway and that he hoped that it would be complete by the end of this year.

Committee News

Public Hearing Discusses Higher Education Issues

On 14 October, the Meshrano Jirga's Religious, Cultural, Education and Higher Education held a public hearing regarding higher education issues in Afghanistan. The public hearing, funded by USAID/APAP, was attended by approximately 70 participants, including the Acting Minister of Higher Education and other relevant government officials, student union representatives, directors of provincial and private universities, parliamentarians, civil society organizations, media representatives, and other concerned stakeholders. Senator Mahmood Danish, a member of the Education committee, chaired the public hearing which addressed the following topics:

1. The entrance examination system
2. Student transfers between universities or faculties
3. Student scholarships
4. Problems encountered by religious students
5. Student accommodation

On the first point, the Acting Minister of Higher Education, Sawar Danish, told the attendees that a draft policy regulating university entrance has been prepared. The new policy would set different criteria for each provincial university. He explained that different criteria were needed in response to disparate education standards that exist throughout the country.

Provincial University Directors in attendance complained that lack of uniform standards would present problems for inter-university student transfers. Student Union Representatives concurred, adding that a criterion should be developed to better facilitate student transfers within the university system.

Regarding student scholarships, the gathering was informed that around 1,500 international placements are available to Afghan university students each year, which are distributed to the provinces proportionally based on Grade 12 attendance. However, the committee heard that due to the varying education standards across provinces, scholarships are being lost because students either fail the selection examinations or drop out midway through a program.

Provincial University Directors proposed to increase the number of students who take scholarship exams in order to widen the pool of candidates and lessen the possibility of scholarships being distributed based on personal networks. They further requested that the full list of scholarships be made public. The Ministry of Education representatives responded that regulations have already been developed to address these issues.

On the topic of religious tuition, the Deputy Minister of Hajj and Islamic Affairs, Abdul Hakim Muneeb, explained that despite often being gifted students, graduates of religious schools do not receive a recognized certificate and thus have difficulty applying for university studies. Mr. Muneeb further proposed that a standard test be developed that could result in the issuance of graduation documents applicable for higher education admission.

On the issue of student accommodation, the Ministry of Higher Education officials stated that although 14,312 students are provided with accommodation nationwide, only 12,781 places are funded by the government. They added that despite requests, the Ministry of Finance has not

approved funding to cover the shortfall, and that international donor support should be sought for new student hostels.

Concluding the public hearing, Senator Mahmood Danish Joo said a committee would be established to follow-up on the issues raised. The committee, he said, would include Meshrano Jirga and Wolesi Jirga members, representatives from relevant ministries, student union representatives and university directors.

The public hearing was the first in a series to be conducted by the Meshrano Jirga committees, with support from USAID/APAP, in the coming weeks.

Legislation

There is no legislative activity to report at this time.

Upcoming Events:

Wolesi Jirga

- Minister of Transport to present his Ministry's annual report to the plenary on 25 October.

Acronyms

ECC	Electoral Complaints Commission
MJ	Meshrano Jirga
MoE	Ministry of Education
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
WJ	Wolesi Jirga