

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



April 18, 2016

## Rise in Children Casualties

It is never justified that civilians lose their lives in different sorts of clashes. Wherever, there are conflicts and wars it is of utmost importance that civilians must be guarded against harms. Unfortunately, that does not happen and there are many civilians who lose their lives in different parts of the world each year. And, among them there are many women and children.

Afghanistan is also one of the countries where the lives of the civilians are at risk because of the prevailing insecurity in different parts of the country. And each year there are thousands of people who lose their lives because of different incidents. Only, last year (2015), more than 11,000 people became the victim, including over 3,500 deaths and almost 7,500 injuries.

The year 2016 is no different (overall, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 'UNAMA' documented 1,943 civilian casualties - 600 deaths and 1,343 injured - between January 1 and March 31, 2016, a two-percent increase since the same period in 2015). The circumstances clearly show a rise in insecurity, and intensification in fighting has already started and the civilians are effected the worse, which otherwise should not be the case. As suggested by Nicholas Haysom, the head of UNAMA, "Even if a conflict intensifies, it does not have to be matched by corresponding civilian suffering provided parties take their international humanitarian law and human rights obligations seriously. Failure to respect humanitarian obligations will result in more suffering in a nation that has suffered enough." However, insecurity haunts civilians and children as usual make an alarming percentage (one-third) of the overall casualties. According to a report by UNAMA at least 161 children have been killed in Afghanistan since the beginning of 2016. It's a 29-percent of increase compared to the first three months of 2015. UNAMA recorded 610 children casualties - 161 deaths and 449 injured.

Danielle Bell, human rights director of UNAMA said in a statement, "If the fighting persists near schools, playgrounds, homes and clinics, and parties continue to use explosive weapons in those areas - particularly mortars and IED tactics, these appalling numbers of children killed and maimed will continue."

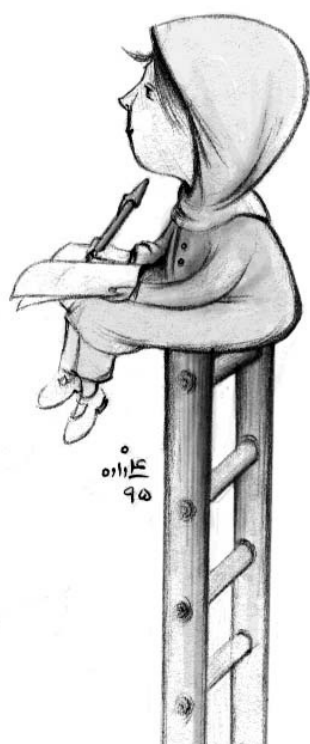
UNAMA also noted that ground engagements caused the highest number of child casualties, followed by unexploded ordnance and IEDs. It said in its statement, "UNAMA notes with extreme concern that increased fighting in populated areas continues to kill and injure women and children at higher rates than the general population."

It is very unfortunate to see the innocent children become the victim of war and violence. Mostly, Taliban insurgents are responsible for the deaths of poor children. They, otherwise, claim to be the protector of the rights of the people but their actions show otherwise. It is really important that they should at least observe Islamic ethics in their actions. Islam clearly says that the lives of the civilians and particularly of the children must be secured in every sort of war or clash.

Apart from these incidents of violence there are many other ways through which violence is practiced against children. They are recruited by Taliban as 'fighters' and mostly as suicide bombers. There have been many incidents of suicide attacks in different parts of the country, wherein the attacker were below 16 years of age.

Recruitment of the children by militants ultimately results in violence against children and their abuse. The attitude of a trained militant clearly depicts the fact that the training sessions in their training camps do involve severe kind of violence and maltreatment. There have been certain incidents wherein the trainees of such camps have made confessions about the way they are treated. They disclosed that they were beaten and tortured and even raped by their tutors.

Another type of violence includes the killing and maiming of the children because of the conflict-related violence. This also includes accidental killings or injuries by the national and international security forces, which, though relatively are much lower than the ones committed by the terrorists. Unfortunately, most of the deaths or injuries in this regard have been the result of the violent attacks of the terrorists on schools and hospitals. Such attacks do not only take precious lives but tend to inflict fear among parents and children regarding attending schools. The security of the children against all sort of violence and their proper nourishment are the most important considerations to contemplate on, if the government is really serious to safeguard the rights of the children. The same children are going to be the builders of future; their proper care should be ascertained through every possible means. Apart from the government the members of the society can also play a tremendous role in diminishing violence against the children by safeguarding their children from the terrorists and their evil intentions. Particularly, they can rescue their children from extremism and terrorism if they keep them away from extreme religious conditioning and do not let them become the cadre for insurgency and violence.



## Taliban Offensive: A Test of Survival for Afghanistan

Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Shortly after announcement of the so-called Omari Operation by the Taliban, the group has launched a major offensive in Kunduz province opening different fronts aimed at taking a number of key districts and the strategic Northern city. In the meantime, security officials say intense fighting is underway in about ten provinces in the north, south and east of the country with the both sides inflicting heavy casualties to the militant groups. According to security officials, Afghan security forces have managed to repel Taliban's offensives during last three days in Kunduz districts and other areas. The ongoing Taliban offensive is coming as a large-scale and massively coordinated assault aimed at taking major gains in the very early days of the Taliban offensive codenamed as Omari Operation.

In the coming weeks and months, heavy fighting is expected in major provinces in the north, east and the south. It seems that the Taliban once again have chosen key districts and provinces in these areas as targets of their operation. The Omari operation will focus on gaining major achievements in the mentioned provinces including taking ground from government forces and inflicting heavy casualties on the Afghan national security forces. If the Taliban manage to take any major gains on the ground, that would boost the morale of the militants and will help them to expand and intensify scale of the group's operation both in these vulnerable provinces and elsewhere across the country. Making successes in these vulnerable provinces would play as gateway for taking more grounds and continuing successes on the battlefield against government forces. The Taliban will expectedly pursue the war approach they used in their last year's offensive against government forces. Last year, the Taliban managed to take the northern Kunduz province momentarily and also held many other key districts for longer periods of time. Taliban's offensive approach last year held Afghan security agencies by surprise and stretched resources and forces of ANSF. ANSF experienced many setbacks against the militant groups as it fought a chaotic campaign to repel the Taliban and secure the areas that Taliban had chosen as their grounds of offensive.

ANSF while fighting the Taliban in last year fighting season suffered mainly from lack of effective leadership and a lack of coordination in different levels of command. Lack of leadership in the highest levels led to lack of strategic approach in the fight against the enemy which in turn resulted in failing to shape effective defensive and invasive strategies against the Taliban. Lack of coordination led to weaker reinforcements for the fighting units that were being caught by the Taliban's siege or heavy assault by the militants. There were many cases that the army and police units lost men and territory solely due to not receiving timely support or any kind of reinforcement from the central headquarters or nearby military commands. Due to lack of effective and comprehensive

war strategy, government forces were compelled to fight and defensive war from the weaker position.

The security agencies need to avoid mistakes of last year campaign in defending key vulnerable provinces and repelling the Taliban offensive. ANSF needs to remain mobile and quick in taking reactionary measures against the enemy and take the war to the grounds of the militants. ANSF needs to improve its ability to dispatch timely reinforcements to support units engaged in fighting the militant groups. Aerial support will key for the ongoing battle to repel the Taliban offensive. The Afghan government must ensure there is sufficient air support whether by the fledgling Afghan air force or that of NATO forces stationed in Afghanistan. The army and police need to drastically shift their war approach and focus on offensive operations against the militant groups. This will prevent the Taliban from taking major areas that will help their war propaganda and political campaign aimed at weakening public and military morals. For ANSF to be able to lead a successful military campaign, the government needs to provide the political support needed for the military leading the campaign against the militant groups particularly the Taliban. The Taliban threat needs to be prioritized as the biggest and imminent for security and stability of the country and sustainability of the government. Officials say that the National Unity Government (NUG) has just compiled a national defense strategy that has dealt with dealing the Taliban and other groups and defining the existing threats to the country. This is coming as a promising measure by the government among other measures to boost the anti-insurgency campaign. The Taliban have chosen war by refusing to come to the table of negotiations with the government. The obvious fact remains that the militant groups will not come to table of negotiations until they are crushed militarily or weakened by military means. Only then the militant will realize the need for making peace and ending the conflict through negotiations. Peace efforts must be backed by military victories. NUG needs to focus more on winning on the military grounds rather than pinning high hopes on the success of peace talks.

On the other hand, regional and international allies particularly Pakistan needs to prove its sincerity in its role in stabilizing Afghanistan. Pakistani authorities have repeatedly asserted that they want peace in Afghanistan and that the enemies of Afghanistan are enemies of Pakistan. Words are sufficient and it should be proved in action. The ongoing campaign against the Taliban is coming as a real test for Pakistan's government and the country's military establishment. Islamabad needs to pressurize the militant groups by taking explicit actions against the leadership of the group. Pakistan can play a role in this fighting season and take actions to help the Afghan government contain and repel the ongoing Omari Operation.

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## Environmental Management!

By Mohd. Mehdi Rezaie

A silent disaster making itself gradually felt all across Afghanistan is an environmental one. Afghanistan faces an acute environmental crisis due to decades of war and neglect. The extent of destruction of environment in Afghanistan is astonishing with the situation set to get worse as wars and conflicts continue and an imminent population explosion that is predicted to take place over the next three decades. The environmental future for Afghanistan looks grim as Afghanistan's unfolding environmental catastrophe remains neglected by both the government and the international community. Afghanistan, in its long history, had definitely seen better days as far as environment is concerned. Forests, wetlands, pastures, grazing lands and all which constitute a natural and thriving environment have been subjected to extensive destruction, living the already poor masses with fewer means of livelihood. In the midst of all that has befallen Afghanistan since 2001 and whether for the government of Afghanistan or the international community, conservation and restoration of Afghanistan's environment has not been a priority to address. The attention and resources of the government and its international partners have been totally grabbed by other issues that they have deemed more urgent. However, the fact remains that Afghanistan will indeed face an existential threat in coming decades if the current trend of environmental destruction continues and the already destroyed is not restored.

The ongoing environmental catastrophe in Afghanistan include the following: massive and ongoing deforestation, shrinking and disappearance of green lands such as wetlands, woodlands, grazing lands and pastures, continued desertification of many such green areas (as a result of which these green areas gradually become deserts) the accelerating pace of soil erosion (loss of cultivable farming soil), air pollution especially in urban areas such as Kabul, disappearing wildlife and their natural habitats as a result of extensive hunting and poaching of wild animals and birds. As a result of environmental degradation and destruction in the country, tens of thousands of people have already been displaced over the past one decade when the habitats they lived in could no longer support their livelihoods.

Deforestation continues to be a major factor in the trend of environmental degradation that is sweeping across the country. According to officials in Afghanistan's Environmental Protection Agency, the country has lost over 70% of its forest areas over the past four decades. Jungles and forests are natural barriers against such natural events such as avalanches, landslides and flooding. The rise in such events in recent years across the country is, among other things, a result of deforestation and the loss of woodland cover in many vulnerable areas of the country.

The continued loss of green lands such as pastures and grazing lands is particularly harmful to the livelihoods of people in villages and rural areas. More than 70% of the population in the country lives in villages and rural areas which depends on herding and raising of livestock to

eke out their meager livings. When pastures and grazing lands slowly disappear owing to over-exploitation, drought, soil erosion and other factors, the livelihoods of a sizable section of these people come under strain and are in fact destroyed. This unfortunate trend has continued over many years now and by all indications, it will continue if the government and the international community do not mobilize resources to deal with the issue. Natural environment is extremely fragile including the eco-system and various forces in the environment that balance one another. Any disturbing force such as over-grazing of herds and livestock by people can easily disturb this balance and lead to degradation of environment in the long run. As said, raising livestock and herds such as goats, sheep, cows and other animals, collectively called animal husbandry; along with farming are major activities of people in rural areas. If the current trend of destruction of these fragile eco-systems continues, the country will not be able to support a large section of its people within the next 2 to 3 decades.

Coming to urban areas such as Kabul and other large cities, these cities too face a grave and deteriorating pattern of environmental degradation. Cities in Afghanistan such as Kabul have witnessed a phenomenal growth in population in recent years. Flow of people and refugees from villages into cities in search of jobs and better security has continued non-stop. Kabul's population, a city originally designed to house 1 million people, has surpassed 6 million including its suburbs and the flow of migrants continues unabated. The result has been a severe pressure on the city's resources. Underground aquifers' water levels within Kabul have already gone down considerably rendering many of the hand-operated wells dry. Already, many communities and localities are finding their wells hitting dry, forcing them to seek water elsewhere. Kabul's solid waste management system is in effect non-existent in many areas and suburbs with the central parts of the city receiving waste collection services as and when the people assigned for the job find time or equipment to do so. Waste and rubbish litter roads, streets, lanes and by-lanes playing havoc with people's health. An economically well-off and healthy nation and people can be possible only if the natural environment allows them to thrive and prosper. The environmental degradation that started decades ago, by now after three decades of war, has turned into a major crisis. If the government, authorities and people themselves continue to neglect the issues and problems, then an Afghanistan 30 years from now with a population of 60 million (double its current population) will be poorer and more desperate than now. With the current situation in the country and the continuation of war and conflict, the government and the international community do not concern themselves with this environmental catastrophe that is unfolding; but neglect and ignorance for how long? The solution lies in large-scale mobilization of government, international community assisting in Afghanistan, people and local communities across the country to actively conserve the environment and prevent the catastrophe.

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