

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



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## The Ever Widening Gap

One of the characteristics of Afghan society has been its division into rich and poor. There has always been a wide gap between the rich class and the power people. When the society was overwhelmingly tribal and feudal and was led by monarchy, the situation was no different. The king, his relatives, the landlords, and tribal heads had most of the authority and power by dint of their wealth, while the poor people, mostly farmers, had to face lack of resources, wealth and ultimately power.

The situation has not improved much even in today's Afghanistan. Though, the country is said to be democratic, it still remains tribal to a large extent. And, more unfortunate is the fact that the socio-political setup has not changed much in its essence. There have been certain changes in the appearance or the attire but the infra-structure still remains the same.

Afghan society can be easily divided into two classes, factions or strata, whatever they are named. There are marked differences between both the classes and they can be easily observed. A very dominant and clear line can be drawn between them and the gap between them can be observed conveniently. Ill-fatedly, that gap seems to be getting wider with each passing day.

The intervention of international community, though changed Afghan society to certain extent, it could not bring about real change. In fact, it further widened the gap between the rich and the poor. The wealth that poured in the country for assistance and help could only find the rich people waiting for them. Therefore, they made sure that it did not reach the poor and deserving masses and made sure to strengthen their position with its support. This intensification in inequality can be easily observed in different parts of the country. For example, in capital Kabul, through cursory observation one can find the unevenness in the so-called development - poor and muddy houses can be easily observed in the shadows of tall buildings and in similar fashion various groups of poor children can be found running after or beside luxury cars for alms.

Apart from that, its manifestations can be found in various other ways as well. Just consider the way the law and order system treat the people. There is a marked difference between how the rich people are treated by it and how the poor are victimized. Those among the rich who might have earned all their earnings through illegal means, can easily avoid any sort of punishment by law enforcement agencies. They can threaten the police, dodge them or even bribe them. They can even buy the decisions of the courts in their favor. There is no way they can be punished. If they have no other way, they can even escape easily from the country.

While there are many poor people, who might have not done any crime or may have committed small crimes so as to fulfill the overgrowing necessities of life, to serve their families or to find some morsels of food can be caught easily, and more easily can they be punished. Thus justice has itself become the will of the rich.

This division is not a natural phenomenon. There can be rich and poor in a society but in Afghanistan they have reached to the extreme. There are extremely rich and poor people and the gap between them is ever widening. This generates injustice and also a sense of dispossession. The ones who are deprived, who are intentionally kept away from the facilities and treated in the worst possible manner will become nonconformist. They will definitely rise against the government and against the system. They know that they would not be provided the deserving rights, therefore, they will opt for illegal means and will thus generate many social evils.

There should be necessary measures to curb the situation. First, it should be made sure that justice should be maintained in its true spirit, i.e. it must not favor only the upper class; rather the upper class itself should be treated by the law and order system in the same way as the other classes. To put it in simpler terms it can be said that social stratification should not be changed to social injustice.

Second, social mobility should be made smoother in our society. For example, it should not be very difficult for a person taking birth in a lower class to work hard, develop the capability and move to the middle and even to upper class.

There should be equal opportunities for almost all the members of the society to excel in their lives and become rich. The reverse should be maintained as well, i.e. the people born in rich families but not working hard should be pushed to the lower strata. Social mobility should be able to provide some oxygen for the social setup to inhale so that it must keep on living.



## The Persistent Rise of Civilian Casualties

Abdul Ahad Bahrami

According to a report released by UN mission in Afghanistan, civilian casualties in Afghanistan have increased two percent in the first three months of this year compared to the same period last year. Despite the increase in overall civilian fatalities, there has been 13 percent decrease in civilian deaths in this period. Sixty percent of the casualties of the civilian population are attributed to the armed anti-government groups while government forces and pro-government militias are taken accountable for 19 percent of the civilian casualties. With the intensification of the war and violence in Afghanistan, civilian casualties have been constantly on the rise in the country in recent years. The announcement over the rise of civilian casualties is coming at a time when the Taliban have resumed their annual offensive that is expected to further lead to rise of civilian casualties in the country.

With the start of the Taliban's Omari operation, civilian population in Afghanistan will continue to suffer the most and there will be further increases in civilian casualties. The sustained increase in fatalities of civilians in Afghanistan in recent years is a result of the deterioration of security and the heightened war and violence across the country. The sharp rise of casualties of children is particularly worrisome. With the peace initiative in stalemate and the war at its peak, civilian casualties will continue to rise and there is no prospect for end of the suffering of the civilian population unless there are certain measures taken by all relevant parties including the Taliban, the Afghan government and the United Nations.

All parties of the war are obliged to international war-time laws and regulations including the Taliban and other non-state actors. In Afghanistan, protection of civilian should be a priority for all parties of the war. All sides should do their best to prevent suffering and fatalities of civilians. According to the UN annual reports, the insurgent groups, in particular the Taliban, are accountable for a large part of the civilian casualties in Afghanistan. The militant groups should be taken accountable for their crimes by the international community and the UN and other pro-human rights groups. There needs to be sustainable pressures over the militant groups to demonstrate explicit commitments for avoiding using civilian as human shield and taking shelter in civilian-populated areas.

The United Nations and the Afghan government need to promote and seek negotiating channels with the Taliban and other militant groups over the issue of protecting civilians. The Taliban have time and again stressed that they are morally bound to avoid suffering of civilians and innocent people. There is room for discussions between the Afghan government and the UN on one side and the Taliban on the other side. There have long been unofficial contact lines between politicians and pro-government figures and the Taliban members. The

Afghan government made efforts to start peace talks with the Taliban to bring an end to the conflict in the country. Despite that the efforts did not succeed to bring the Taliban to the table of negotiations, it created a mechanism for multi-lateral cooperation to pursue the peace efforts and persuade the Taliban for negotiations.

The Afghanistan needs to include the issue of civilian casualties to any future peace plan. Also the issue of civilian casualties should be included in the peace agenda of the four-nation coordination group which is tasked with preparing the ground for resumption of negotiations with the Taliban. The United Nations has long been persuading the Taliban to care for civilians and avoid deaths of civilian populations in the battlefields. However, the militants have persistently committed atrocities against civilians despite that the Taliban leaders claim respect for dignity and safety of civilian and innocent people. Most of the casualties occur in bombings for which the Taliban are responsible the most, and ground battles between government forces and the militant groups while the militants use civilian populated areas as shelters and safe havens.

The civilian casualties should be viewed as a major aspect of the conflict in the country and should be dealt with through intensive negotiations along other measures by the government. The high rate of civilian deaths further endangers the efforts to stabilize the country and boost public confidence to the credibility of the state and the Afghan security forces. The government must view the issue as a major aspect of the conflict and take specific measures to decrease suffering of the civilian. The government can make it a top priority in the peace efforts and the conditions for peace negotiations with the Taliban. In addition, it has the opportunity to pursue the issue through international agencies like the United Nations Security Council and platforms of regional cooperation. Neighboring countries and other parties who have influence over the Taliban can play a role in persuading the Taliban to respect international law on protecting civilians.

The Taliban must remain committed to avoid civilian casualties through implementing particularly war regulations. Each year, the Taliban leader used to direct guidelines to the group's fighters and field commanders to prevent civilian casualties and avoid oppressing the innocent citizens. With the start of Omari operation, the Taliban are going to further scale up violence which makes the civilian populations particularly vulnerable. The Afghan government needs to focus on preventing the militants to take footholds in civilian areas in the far remote districts and rural areas. The issue of civilian casualties will test government's ability to provide relative security and maintain order and stability which, in turn, will help to restore public confidence to the government and the Afghan security forces.

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## Air Pollution - A Critical Issue in Afghanistan

By Hujjatullah Zia

Walking on Kabul streets puts one's health at great risk. Thick columns of smoke emitting from brick kilns and factories, bumper-to-bumper vehicles producing harmful gases, malodorous garbage piled in hot weather on the sides of the roads and paths, etc. create various types of disease. Moreover, lack of sanitary facilities, water shortages and low standard of life on one hand and dense population of the city on the other hand make living highly challenging in Kabul.

The tangle of traffic that knots up downtown Kabul almost every day is one of the few hints of the invisible killer stalking the city. Tens of thousands of vehicles that choke the city's roads are old, run on leaded gasoline and have dodgy exhaust systems. Many vehicles are driven over long unpaved roads kicking up clouds of dust. All these polluting cars are crammed into a city that is badly overcrowded.

It is said that most of the fuels used in Afghanistan do not comply with international standards and contain high levels of lead. A study carried out by the Afghan ministry of health in 2009 showed that the blood samples of 80 per cent of some 200 Kabul residents contained lead.

Population density in Kabul is high and most of the hills and mountain tops are occupied by houses that are lacking sanitation and access to clean water. During the rain and snow, the urban runoff saturated with human waste is transported down the hills to the streets below. The mix is ground by passing traffic to a very fine powder and once dry, it is airborne by the wind and moving traffic. Similarly, sub-standard generators built from the old engines of cars, burning of plastic, old car tires, burnt engine oil, burning wood which is very oily in bathhouses, burning of coal ash in brick kilns, Public bathhouses and bakeries and many other noxious non-organic substances, are responsible for 20 to 25 per cent of the air pollution in the city of Kabul.

With the passage of years, due to population growth and the increasing number of vehicles on the road, the problem has grown more challenging, and it is believed that everybody is now susceptible to health hazards caused by air pollution. Lack of educational institutions and job opportunities, insecurity in restive provinces, etc. have forced the citizens to flock to Kabul so as to sustain life. Environmental issues are inter-connected.

No city in Afghanistan has a proper and technical management of solid waste.

They are dumping waste in valleys and open fields, which is extremely dangerous not only in polluting the air, but also for underwater pollution. For many it will not be an insurgent attack

that causes you harm in Afghanistan, but more likely the air you breathe. According to the Afghan Ministry of Health, up to 3,000 citizens die each year in Kabul due to air pollution - this is highly critical. The facts are that there are also many more who suffer from severe upper and lower chest infections, including asthma, chronic bronchitis and heart disease.

Since the country was at war for the past three decades, there was no environmental protection at all. Doctors warn that unless effective mechanism is taken to tackle the crisis, Kabul faces serious problems. If air pollution keeps rising in the same way, Afghan people will encounter with a health disaster in the near future.

In December 2007, the Afghan government announced that haphazard, makeshift homes located on the hills around Kabul would be demolished so that trees and other plants could grow there. Plans were also announced to pave all roads to alleviate transportation problems and optimize urban spatial planning. While some work has been done on paving the main streets of the capital, the hilltop homes continue to stand and the waste produced by their occupants are waiting to be washed down to the streets of Kabul by spring rains.

In the same year, the World Health Organization released a report ranking Afghanistan as the lowest among non-African nations in deaths from environmental hazards.

Experts believe that war may kill thousands of civilians a year in Afghanistan, but choking air pollution in the capital Kabul is more deadly. The air pollution is a silent killer of large number of Afghan citizens and Kabul residents bear the brunt of the pollutions. Considering this fact, Afghan government has to counter pollution more seriously than terrorism. The factories, bathhouses and brick kilns must be standardized and moved outside the city.

Constitutionally, the state is obligated to adopt necessary measures to protect and improve forests as well as the living environment. Instead, politicians succumb to pressure by commercial enterprises and their promises of financial gain. The government fails to impose high taxes on the import of old cars to a handful of influential people who own automobile import businesses.

Launching a strong environmental awareness campaign will play an effective role in decreasing pollution and make people more attentive to their surroundings. Citizens should be aware of their responsibilities regarding their environments. Moreover, the government must encourage them to plant trees and prevent them from deforestations. In a nutshell, both the government and nation will have to fulfill their responsibilities regarding the environment and do their best to stop polluting it.

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