

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

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**Mixed Feelings  
about Peace Talks**

The war-war and talk-talk policy continues and Afghans fluctuate between fear and hope about the outcome of peace talks. The Taliban political office continues peace talks; whereas their military commanders intensify their suicide bombings and terrorist attacks against Afghan soldiers and civilians.

US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is meeting Afghan officials and preparing for eighth round of talks with more optimism after citing the seventh round of talks in Qatar the "most productive".

In his meeting with the US President Donald Trump in Washington last week, Pakistani Prime Minister said he would seek to meet with the Taliban and urge them to negotiate with the Afghan government.

Subsequently, the Taliban signaled positively to Khan's statements saying that they would accept if Pakistan invites them for a meeting. Later on, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that the Taliban were ready for a meeting with Islamabad and Pakistan would play the role of a mediator for restoration of peace in Afghanistan.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also tweeted that he talked with President Ashraf Ghani and the two "agreed that now is the time to accelerate efforts to reach a negotiated end to the war in Afghanistan".

However, the militants carried out deadly attacks on the political office of Amrullah Saleh, the running mate of Ashraf Ghani in upcoming presidential elections, on Sunday killing and wounding dozens of people. The attacks came on the first day of the start of presidential campaign. Although no parties have claimed responsibility for the attacks, the nature of the attacks is similar to that of the Taliban. Perhaps the Taliban are waiting so that the IS group would claim the responsibility, as it always did for any attacks to demonstrate its strength, but this time the IS group did not claim, either. Moreover, the Taliban's footprint is felt in Sunday's attacks since they voiced their disagreement against elections on several occasions.

Sunday's attacks suggest that the militants are still strong enough to enter a car-laden bombs and carry out large-scale attacks in the heart of Kabul. It also indicates that the militant groups are strongly against elections and democracy. The Taliban also brought their concern about elections to the table.

It is a known fact that the Taliban has never been concerned about carrying out indiscriminate attacks leading to civilian casualties, similar to Sunday's attack. But they have constantly magnified the size of any attacks by Afghan forces that hit civilian areas or led to civilian casualties.

Nonetheless, civilian casualties have been the main concern of Afghan people and international organizations. Reducing violence will signal the intention of warring parties for peace. Hence, with the approach of the next round of the US-Taliban talks, Afghans expect the Taliban to reduce violence against civilians.

Meanwhile, Afghans believe that Pakistan will be able to put pressure on the Taliban leadership to hold direct talks with the Afghan government. It has to prove its sincerity to both Kabul and Washington through brokering intra-Afghan dialogue and facilitating the honorable exist of the US, which have been demanded by Washington.

It seems hard to connect the dots but one has to view the positive aspect of the peace process since it has entered a crucial phase. In other words, although there are contradictory views and acts, fear and hope, optimism and pessimism, the strong determination of Kabul and Washington and the support of regional states generate hope for finding negotiated settlement to the conflict.

It should be noted that democracy will not come without sacrifices. Afghans have to fight the challenges and participate in the upcoming presidential elections, as they did in the past, so as to support democracy as well as their rights and freedoms. Establishing democracy in a country, which has suffered almost 40 years of conflict, is not possible overnight. A nation needs to pay sacrifices and earn their rights, freedoms, and dignity under democratic principles.

Meanwhile, the Taliban and other militants have to know that targeting civilians will only increase the public hatred against them. Civilian casualties will benefit no parties. Thus, all warring parties have to reduce violence against civilians.

The government has to protect the rights and freedoms of citizens and take strong security measures for presidential campaigns. If the security of voters and voting centers are not ensured, the level of participants in the elections will be tremendously low. And election should bring about positive changes to the destiny of the nation.

The Taliban interlocutors have to put pressure on them not to target civilians. It is time the Taliban declare ceasefire and reach an agreement with their negotiators.

**The Role of Agriculture Industry in  
Economy of Afghanistan and Its challenges**

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

The economy of Afghanistan had significant ups and downs during last two decades. In the first decade of new era, it largely improved due to the infusion of international assistance and new investment. The assistance that came from expatriates and outside investors saw this increase when there was more political reliability after the fall of the Taliban regime; but with decline in international assistance, continuity of war and paying less attention to agriculture industry, which is considered the backbone of Afghanistan economy, it steadily declined. However, Afghanistan has unprecedentedly expanded its transit infrastructure but it will not be enough without increase in domestic production. As ever, there is a huge gap between imports and exports in the country. The imports stand over worth of \$6 billion goods per year while the exports nearly \$1 billion only, mainly fruits production.

Agricultural industries play an important role in economy of Afghanistan as around 80% of Afghan populations are fed by this industry. The climate of Afghanistan is well suited for the cultivation of fruits, vegetables and multiple types of corns and other natural food. Afghanistan is known for producing some of the finest fruits, especially apples, apricots, cherries, figs, grapes, melons, sweet mulberries, peaches, and pomegranates. Building and using greenhouses is a fast-growing industry in country, especially large cities such as Kabul, Herat and Northern provinces. The Northern provinces are famous for pistachio cultivation, but their melon and water melon are unique within country or beyond. Provinces in the east of the country are famous for pine nuts. The northern and central provinces are also famous for almonds and walnuts. The Bamyan province in central province is famous for growing superior potatoes which on an average produces 140,000 to 170,000 tons.

Unfortunately, the productivity of agricultural industry depends to generosity of climate and natural rainfall; in few last years, Afghanistan has gravely suffered from drought and climate change. For example, Afghanistan saw about 24% decline in wheat production and 30% decline in milk production in 2018, according to a World Bank report. However, in 2019, people are happier due to winter rainfall and improved weather conditions. Farmers in the western province of Herat are predicted to produce more than 135,000 tons of grapes this year which shows a 15 percent increase comparing previous years. Unfortunately, this happy news has its own specific challenges need to be highlighted to attentions of officials.

In addition to drought issues in Afghanistan, there are other challenges which negatively affect agriculture industry. The first and most important challenge is lack of proper market for their products and lack of enough cold storage facilities to store fruits, especially grapes. Each type of fruit products is suddenly decanted to markets either spoiled or sold by auction due to lack of enough cold room in country. Therefore, it is highly important for govern-

ment or private investors to establish new cold rooms and improve handling practices inside Afghanistan. Off season products can be offered to consumers fresh at premium prices; thus, cold rooms can be used as instruments to link consumers' demand and organized supply.

According to experts, the process of purchasing, processing, storing and selling produce at a particular time and in a particular market involves an organized supply chain of goods, services and investment. Consumers can benefit from the cold room units because the produce is kept fresh longer (out of season). Producers benefit because farm gate prices tend to be higher and less volatile. Managers of the cold room storage facilities sell fresh produce at premium prices when seasonal supply has declined and have the option for exporting products if linkages are established with markets. Overall, the investment in agro-business and agro-processing will make a positive impact on the domestic production of Afghanistan and will feed millions more people if the agricultural industry gets rid of current challenges.

The second challenge which usually discussed by experts and local farmers is the issue of marketing. However, the establishment of air-corridors has largely responded to this challenge but some provinces such as Herat airport does not have the capacity to load the grapes and send it to foreign countries. If the condition does not improve, we cannot increase our products because a large amount products spoiled or sold by auction before it reach anywhere. Responding to this issue will not only encourage the farmers, but also contribute to decrease of unemployment and social crime reduction in the country. As aforementioned, more than 80 percent of the country's population is engaged in agriculture and livestock so it employs a large number of people are unemployed in the country. The third challenge in agriculture industry is social and political insecurity in the country. The insecurity issue has affected everything including investment in agriculture industry. Election-related disruptions to revenue collection may also undermine the capacity of government to maintain basic services. On the other hand, it is predicted that the ongoing peace talks may unlock substantial investment and growth.

By and large, without accelerated reform in agricultural industry and security situation, the agricultural growth is likely to remain slow with limited progress in reducing poverty from current very high levels. Reforms are required to both improve general investment confidence and mobilize existing economic potential, especially in agriculture and extractives. Continued international assistance in security and development is critical to preserve the past gains and to increase the confidence and investment in the future of Afghanistan.

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**Technology on the Frontline for Girls**

By: Jessica Posner Odede

Today, 1.4 billion girls and women live in countries that are failing on gender equality, in areas ranging from education and decent work to health and violence. Yet one of the most effective ways to empower girls and women – safe and reliable access to mobile phones and the Internet – is in danger of being ignored.

Today, the GSMA – the global trade body for mobile operators – estimates that more than five billion people have mobile devices, over half of which are smartphones. But the rapid diffusion of mobile technology has not been equal. Though the number of women from low- and middle-income countries who own mobile phones has risen by some 250 million in just the last five years, there are still 184 million fewer women than men with mobile phones, and women are 26% less likely than men to use mobile Internet.

Similarly, though younger people own mobile phones at a higher rate than their older counterparts, gender imbalances persist. According to a 2018 study by Girl Effect (of which I am CEO), boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone than girls. Even among those who do own phones, boys are more likely to have smartphones than girls.

But ownership is not the same as access, and our investigations have revealed that girls often find ingenious ways to get their hands on mobile devices. More than half of the girls we interviewed – in places like India, Malawi, and Tanzania – regularly borrow mobile phones from their parents, siblings, or friends. Some also share SIM cards and devices; finding inventive ways of access.

Given the enormous benefits of Internet access, this is good news. For example, a 14-year-old girl in rural Bangladesh, having never been taught about puberty, might be so ashamed about changes she is undergoing that she skips school. But, during the two hours per week she is allowed to borrow her brother's phone, she can learn about menstruation and pregnancy, and connect with a local health facility to arrange in-person advice and care. In other words, mobile access gives her the knowledge and confidence she needs to protect her health – and her future.

Access to mobile phones is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a way to level the playing field not only through knowledge, but also through connection: nowadays, mobile phones are key conduits to drive demand to vital services, such as health and financial services. Ensuring broad and equitable mobile access is thus a

powerful, easily scalable way to help all people make informed decisions about their own lives, in areas ranging from health to education to employment.

Getting girls and women online – whether on their own devices or on borrowed or shared ones – is only the first step. We must also ensure that they have sufficient technical literacy to take full advantage of the devices they are using. Girl Effect's research showed that, overall, boys use far more phone features and capabilities than girls.

Moreover, we must consider what girls find when they get online. Is the information they are receiving accurate? Are they at risk of exploitation? Ignoring these questions would be a missed opportunity – and dangerous.

That is why Girl Effect has been working to create safe online spaces where girls can access reliable information tailored for them, discover valuable services in their area, and connect with others facing – and overcoming – the same challenges. The goal is to foster curiosity, boost self-confidence, and empower girls to pursue their dreams.

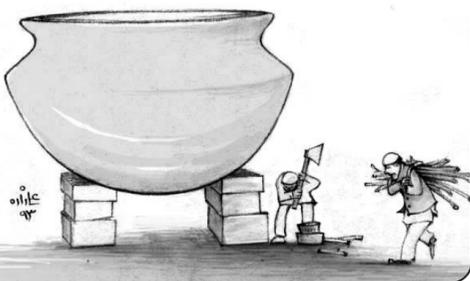
Of course, for such platforms to make a difference, they need to be attractive to users. When girls get online, they might be seeking not to learn, per se, but rather to be entertained. We must meet them where they are, offering experiences that are engaging and – critical for those who lack digital literacy – user-friendly. To this end, girls should be included in the design process.

Girls in Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Malawi are already benefiting from such platforms, and Girl Effect is launching similar initiatives in India and Tanzania. In all of these environments, approaches are tailored to local needs and perspectives, and constantly re-evaluated, in order to account for changes in access and use.

There is no shortage of research demonstrating the far-reaching – and broadly shared – benefits of gender equity. For example, raising female labor-force participation in India could add \$56 billion to the country's economy, making the workforce as a whole 27% richer. That, in turn, would reduce fertility rates and enable higher investment in human capital, driving sustained rapid economic growth and development.

To secure these gains, governments and their partners must invest in technology-based initiatives that respond to the needs and preferences of girls and women. Creating safe, engaging, and informative online platforms for them is a good place to start.

Jessica Posner Odede is CEO of Girl Effect.

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