

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



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## “Elimination of Violence against Women”

Though Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law in Afghanistan was passed by a presidential decree in 2009, it has not been implemented in its true spirit; neither, there has been enough awareness and understanding of the law. To improve this situation, the Ministry of Women's Affairs of Afghanistan on Monday launched a national strategy and action plan with the motive of ensuring that the EVAW law is implemented effectively so that women have legal protection against different sorts of discriminations that take place against them within the society.

This effort by the Ministry is, in fact, a 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence so as to ensure that more women have access to protection services, shelter and justice and they should also make contribution in putting an end to impunity of perpetrators. It also highlights government's role in the protection of women and prosecution of perpetrators, requiring the police to register cases of violence against women and courts and prosecutors to prosecute them as per law.

EVAW law, basically, criminalizes 22 acts of violence against women and harmful practices including child marriage, forcing or prohibiting marriage, forced self-immolation, rape and beating. Proper implementation of the law will definitely support much in elimination of violence against women. Nevertheless, there are many conservative people who do see the law with optimism and unbiased approach. Therefore, it is really vital that proper interpretation of the law and its implications should be elaborated for them. There are hopes that the ongoing activism may play some role in this regard. The important point is to realize the fact that Afghanistan is one of the countries where violence against women is very frequent. It can be easily observed that the incidents violating women rights in the country have not been stopped though there have been many claims of developments. In fact the changes are prevalent only on the exterior while from within the Afghan society still lacks the development it needs in order to reach to a respectable position. The support and assistance of the international community has only been able to provide clean and beautiful attire not a praiseworthy soul to Afghan society. The Afghan social structure has been vehemently dominated by religious extremism and tribal nepotism.

Most of the self-designed religious doctrines and tribal norms are against the women and discriminate their basic rights. Unfortunately, these norms and doctrines have even gone to the extent of violence and have tortured women physically – mostly in the public. They, in the name of dignity of women, have in fact degraded them. The concept of so-called tribal honor and dignity has not been able to provide safety and respect to Afghan women.

There have been many incidents in Afghanistan that have been shocking in their nature and they have shown the worst form of violence against them. Even then, they have not proved to be sufficient enough to convince the authorities that the situation is really grave and they need to take tangible steps to tackle the situation.

Violence against women can only be reduced in Afghanistan when the policies and perceptions regarding women start changing. The authorities can play a key role in this regard. Nonetheless, it is unfortunate to note that Afghan authorities and many important personalities themselves have favored the recommendations and suggestions to limit the participation of women in social and political lives. As most of these authorities are themselves nourished in an extremist patriarchal society and do not have much consideration regarding the role and empowerment of women and consider it against their tribal values that they come out of their houses. It is difficult for them to follow a movement to save women from violence and make them achieve their due place in Afghan society. The status and pursuit of EVAW law is one of the most evident examples. Most of the authorities have shown reluctance to pursue it in its true spirit. The reason is that they do not agree with the law as a whole and have certain objections. Most of them have their self-centered motives. Unfortunately, they use the name of Islam but it should be clarified that Islam does not tolerate violence against women and urge for social and political participation of women.

The ongoing movement for EVAW law can be used to discuss and consider the overall issue of violence against women in Afghanistan seriously along with raising awareness and sensitization regarding EVAW law. The movement can involve the political and religious leaders, especially the ones who have some interest in this regard. They can also involve the authorities that have important positions in the policy-making arena and make them realize their responsibilities. Ultimately, they, along with the people as a whole should continue their efforts in this regard and show that they have respect for women and their human rights.



## The Afghan-Pak Chilly Relations Linger

By Hujjatullah Zia

We need to identify cross-border terrorism and a fund to combat terrorism. Pakistan has pledged \$500m for Afghanistan's development. This amount can be spent to contain extremism. Afghanistan suffered the highest number of casualties last year. This is unacceptable... Some still provide sanctuary for terrorists. As a Taliban figure said recently, if they had no sanctuary in Pakistan, they wouldn't last a month," these words were spoken by Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani at the Heart of Asia Conference in Amritsar, India.

Terrorism is a highly challenging issue in Afghanistan which has inflicted heavy casualties upon Afghan combatants and non-combatants and triggered a sense of mistrust between the state and nation. Within the two last years, Afghan nation bore the brunt of casualties and a large number of people were disposed of on the grounds of their racial and religious backgrounds. The unmitigated militancy and stalemate of peace talks were the main reasons behind Ghani's direct statements.

Insurgency has been mounted with the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its affiliates. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) has, reportedly, carried out countless attacks in the country, mostly targeting the ethnic minority groups. Since the terrorist activities of warring parties – including the Haqqani network, Al Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, East Turkistan Islamic Movement, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, TTP, Jamaat-ul Ahrar, Jundullah – mushroomed in recent months, Ghani pursed his lips about Pakistan's financial support and lashed out at Pakistan believing that a large number of terrorist networks enjoy safe haven in this country and orchestrate deadly attacks from across the border. On the other hand, however, Pakistan was applauded for hosting Afghan refugees for three decades.

It is an unmistakable fact that the Afghan-Pak relations hit rock bottom, mainly after the death of Omar's successor Mullah Akhtar Mansour. When Pakistan failed to persuade the Taliban to come to negotiating table and militancy escalated in the country, a sense of mistrust aroused between Kabul and Islamabad. Afghan officials believed that Pakistan was not seeking a bona fide peace and did not use its "leverage" to put pressure on the Taliban elements. The establishment of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) was the last gleam of hope for Afghan authorities to hold a direct talk with the Taliban but it shattered too following the heated conflict ensued by Mansour's death.

Islamabad constantly denied the claims made by Afghan government and shows tendency to break the stalemate. Pakistani Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz, who attended the Heart of Asia Conference, noted that the peace process for talks between the

Afghan government and the Taliban has not yet produced positive results, adding that the option needed to be explored in a sustained way. He said, "In our view, there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict and all our efforts should be to achieve a politically negotiated settlement through an Afghan-led Afghan-owned process."

Pakistani political pundits state that Pakistan's foreign relation has been weakened and it is marginalized within recent months, especially after the cancellation of SAARC Summit in Islamabad in November. The repeated disapproval of Pakistan will damage its reputation at international level. So, Pakistan has realized this fact and seeks to strengthen its foreign relations suggesting to break the deadlock. To normalize the relation with Kabul, Islamabad must build a mutual trust through putting pressure on the Taliban to hold a genuine peace talks with Afghanistan. It is simply said that 'actions speak louder than words'. An icy relation is not in favor of any countries, it is time for Pakistani officials to prove their words.

If Mullah Haibatullah shows a genuine intention of holding talks and reduces deadly attacks in Afghanistan's soil, the Afghan-Pak relations will thaw. Secondly, Pakistan will not have to pressurize Afghan refugees or treat them with contempt for political reasons. This fact should be considered that Pakistan is also the victim of terrorism and paid great sacrifices in this regard. For instance, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a splinter group of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), inflicted heavy casualties upon Pakistani civilians and also claimed responsibility for August attack on Quetta's Civil Hospital, which left more than 70 people killed and over 100 others wounded. Moreover, the ethnic minority groups come under severe attacks in Pakistan the same as our country.

Hence, since Afghanistan and Pakistan has common enemies, there is a dire need to amiable agreement for pursuing peace and stability. The blame game will further deteriorate the situation and let the terrorist networks muddy the water more than ever before. In addition, militancy will not be mitigated if the two countries continue blaming each other sarcastically. Despite mounting insurgency in the country, Afghan officials still call warring parties to stop violence and bloodshed and join peace talks – but peace agreement was signed only with Hezb-e-Islamic Afghanistan (HIA) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

In short, peace negotiation will be a pyrrhic victory for Afghan government as it has been less fruitful despite years of struggle. Since terrorist networks are changing into global threat, the world will have to combat terrorism with strong determination and pay especial heed to vulnerable countries, particularly Afghanistan which is historically considered the heart of Asia.

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## Dramatic Increase in HIV/Aids

By Muhammad Zahir Akbari

Afghanistan is in the early stage of dramatic increase of HIV/AIDS while the main route of transmission are reported needle sharing; Officials in the ministry of public health of Afghanistan informed of impressive increase in HIV/AIDS positive cases in the country. Deputy public health minister Najia Tariq said on Sunday that the HIV/AIDS cases have increased by 38 percent as compared to last year. She said at least 162 HIV/AIDS positive cases have been recorded across the country during the current year, but around 117 HIV positive cases were recorded last year. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates around 5,000 people are affected with HIV/AIDS virus across the country, and only 30 percent of HIV positive cases have been recorded so far whereas, historically, the first HIV positive case was recorded in earlier in 1989.

In addition to damage of immune system, the HIV victims are additionally damaged by mental trauma in traditional societies such as Afghanistan. They may face with humiliating behavior or easily isolated by their family and friends, or by their community. On the other hand, they face with poor treatment in health-care and educational settings. It all starts with a sense of disbelief when tested positive and then the patient loses all hope, leading to panic and fear.

Many people living with HIV are at an increased risk of developing mood swings, cognitive or anxiety disorders. These can severely affect the nervous system.

In global level, the HIV/AIDS is not over but it can be if we tailor the response to individual needs at particular times in life. According to reports, there are about 78 million people who have become infected with HIV and 35 million have died from AIDS-related illnesses since the first cases. The number of new HIV infections has not declined specially among adults and young women. The latest data by the WHO shows that there are 37 million people living with the disease and only 18.2 million people are receiving antiretroviral treatment worldwide.

Hence, there is serious need to raising awareness in order to prevent the spread and pave the way for access to antiretroviral medicines. A life-cycle approach to HIV that finds solutions for everyone at every stage of life can address the complexities of HIV. Risks and challenges change as people go through life, highlighting the need to adapt HIV prevention and treatment strategies from birth to old age. Specially, those with positive results should immediately seek help and confirm reports from health clinics. They also require receiving information and links to counseling as well as rapid referral to prevention, treatment and care services.

Luckily, The World Health Organization (WHO) issued new guidelines on HIV self-testing to help with the diagnosis of

the deadly disease. The initiative by the UN health organization aims to help millions know about their HIV status and get the right treatment. With the easy and pertinent self-testing kit, people around the world can know about their status within "20 minutes". The WHO report says, "HIV self-testing means people can use oral fluid or blood- finger-pricks to discover their status in a private and convenient setting," the self-testing should open the door for many more people to know about their HIV status and eventually lead the patients to find out how to get treatment and access prevention services.

In addition, some scientists are informing about vaccines and new methods of cure. A large-scale trial of a potential vaccine is underway in South Africa. The study will involve more than 5,400 sexually active men and women ages 18 to 35 in a number of areas around South Africa, a country where more than 1,000 people a day are infected with HIV. The trial will last for four years.

According to the latest WHO progress report, "lack of an HIV diagnosis is a major obstacle to implementing the expert advices that everyone with HIV should be offered antiretroviral therapy (ART)."

As Millions of people with HIV are still missing out on life-saving treatment, which can also prevent HIV transmission to others. The report shows that 40 per cent of all people affected with the HIV-virus (over 14 million) remain unaware of their status. "Many of these are people at higher risk of HIV infection who often find it difficult to access existing testing services. Self-testing is a best way to reach more people with undiagnosed HIV and represents a step forward to empower individuals, diagnose people earlier before they become sick, bring services closer to where people live, and create demand for HIV testing. This is particularly important for those people facing barriers to accessing existing services. Even so 23 countries have national policies that support HIV self-testing. Many others are developing policies, but wide-scale implementation of HIV self-testing remains limited. The alarming report also suggested that 70 per cent people whose partners are affected by the virus, they also test positive to the test but many of those do not get tested to ascertain their status. Finally, there are several factors and route in Afghanistan contributing to the risk of a HIV epidemic, including economic, social, demographic, unweariness, syringe sharing, un-screened emigrants or visitors and behavioural determinants that, if not addressed effectively, may fuel the spread of HIV. In fact, there is need to national strategy for prevention and fight against issue focusing on certain effected groups such as IDUs, prisoners, foreign sex workers, emigrants and visitors.

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