

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



December 09, 2015

## Can Heart of Asia Conference be a New Beginning?

There are expectations that the Fifth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference (Istanbul Process) in Islamabad will pave the way for the peace process between Afghan government and Taliban. The Conference will start today and the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif are expected to jointly inaugurate it. However, the conference was preceded by the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) yesterday.

Pakistani Prime Minister's Advisor on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, said in a press release: "We are looking forward to the participation of high-ranking delegations from 14 participating states, 17 supporting countries and 12 international and regional organizations. Foreign Ministers from ten countries have confirmed participation in the conference."

The Heart of Asia Conference was basically established in 2011 at the initiative of Afghanistan and Turkey. The main objective of the Conference includes fostering efforts for regional cooperation and connectivity so as to promote long-term peace and stability, and progress and development in Afghanistan and the region.

Yesterday's SOM Meeting paved the way for the main Conference. Sartaj Aziz, while delivering the opening remarks at the meeting, said, "Pakistan wants durable peace and stability in Afghanistan. Instability in Afghanistan is not in our interest. We will, therefore, continue to support all endeavors aiming at strengthening peace and security in Afghanistan. As Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process is maturing, our focus has to be on strengthening our engagement and collaboration with a view to effectively combating the formidable challenges confronting the region, in the field of security as well as promoting regional economic interaction."

It has been one of the most dominating facts that both Afghanistan and Pakistan have been suffering because of the evils of terrorism and religious extremism. They need to realize that they have a common enemy threatening their stability and security. Both know that they need to sit together to solve the gigantic task of making their countries terrorism free; therefore, it would be very unwise for both of them to keep their memories filled with what had happened in the past and they really need to restart a new phase of better relationships.

Unfortunately, the cooperation between both the governments regarding the process has never been long lasting. There have been many episodes in the drama of the peace process but it has never been concluded. To start anew, there has to be a comprehensive trust building strategy. This is a golden time to do the same as Sharif's government seems ready to bring about changes in the way Afghanistan and the region see the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan.

For Afghanistan it is really an important phase of the history. The international troops are to withdraw and there would be great challenges for Afghanistan, both in security and the establishment of strong political setup. It is believed that the regional countries can play a dominant role in the post withdrawal Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan's cooperation would make the matters easier.

It is also important that the Pakistan must pursue a trust building strategy so as to make the regional countries believe that it is really very positive regarding its role in developing peace and tranquility in Afghanistan. Most of the analysts believe that Pakistan's role in Afghanistan has largely relied on the role of India in Afghanistan and vice versa. The uneasy relations between the two countries have influenced their relations with Afghanistan. However, Nawaz Sharif has mentioned on several occasions that Pakistan realizes the important role of the regional countries in supporting Afghanistan's progress towards stability and prosperity and stressed that continued engagement by the international community in Afghanistan's economic and social development and reconstruction would be essential in ensuring the long-term security and prosperity of the Afghan people. It is important to see how Pakistan can improve its relations with all the regional countries regarding the improvement of peace process in Afghanistan.

On the other hand US also wants to see Afghanistan and Pakistan having healthy relations as it would support in peace building process, which is very much essential before US completely leaves Afghanistan as it would guarantee better possibilities of peace in the country. US President Obama seems to agree that it is in America and Pakistan's interests for Afghanistan to be stable and secure. In the recent meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, he urged Pakistan to take more concrete measures for the development of peace in Afghanistan.

This Conference is of immense importance for it can be a new start for initiation of peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban, which was basically at halt after the talks in Murree. Afghan President showed his concerns regarding Pakistan's effort after it was disclosed that Taliban leader Mullah Omar had died few years earlier. Nonetheless, during the recent meeting in Paris both Afghan and Pakistani leaders promised to start the process anew.

It is really vital that the Conference must end with tangible measures regarding the development of peace in Afghanistan and in the region and must not be repetition of promises alone.

## Afghanistan is not Ripe of Migrants' Return

By Hujjatullah Zia

Afghanistan's immature democracy is not a panacea for our bleeding nation. The unmitigated pain and suffering of the public continue unabated. One's freedom is curtailed and people's rights and dignity are violated in one way or another. Life is very cheap. The tragic episode of civilians' death makes the daily headlines on local newspapers. The gleam of hope has disappeared and there is a deep sense of fear and disappointment in the air.

The Taliban's heavy offensives and emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Afghanistan pose further threat to the life of men, women and children. The recent sectarian violence - which seems to be the product of ISIL's foothold in the country - has aggravated the political instability.

The "war on terror" did not come to fruition. As stated by US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, "The narrative that we're leaving Afghanistan is self-defeating". It has been obvious from the beginning that a complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan will have disastrous consequences. According to the UN, the Taliban are now spread through more parts of the country than at any point in 2001. It is unlikely that a small presence of US troops could ever bring hostilities to an end, especially when 100,000 troops were not able to accomplish that goal.

Similarly, the revelation of Mullah Muhammad Omar's death on late July led to splinter group and brought the peace negotiation to a deadlock. Currently, the warring factions - Mullah Akhtar Mansour's pro and anti-groups - have made a genuine peace talk next to impossible. Therefore, terrorism has changed into an interminable challenge in the country and Afghanistan's High Peace Council (HPC) has achieved no tangible result. In a nutshell, insecurity persists in the country without an effective strategy from the government to tackle the crisis.

Insecurity has wreaked havoc on the country's economy. A large number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have abandoned Afghanistan on the grounds of terror and militancy. Similarly, the traders and investors withdrew their capital from the country, especially when some businessmen lost their lives by unknown men in recent months. Therefore, the graph of unemployment is extremely high and scores of university graduates wander without job.

Meanwhile, crime and corruption have escalated on a large scale. In other words, poverty forces people to succumb to a series of crime such as robbery, kidnapping, murder, moral turpitude, etc. so as to survive economic pressures. On top of it, orphans and widowed mothers either beg or hawk cheap objects on the streets from dawn to dusk - despite the cold weather - just to make the ends meet. It should be noted that the poor will show tendency to crime and corruption when being turned a blind eye.

As a last resort, a large number of people, mainly youths, have

flocked to foreign countries to flee political and economic crises. Although, the brain drain has aggravated the challenges, there seems no other choice. The National Unity Government (NUG) has no certain mechanism to combat terrorism or tackle the economic stagnation. The rise in civilians' death toll and unemployment are disregarded by high-ranking officials and the voice of the victims' families and MPs fall on deaf ears.

Constitutionally, the government is responsible to "Establish an order based on the peoples' will and democracy; form a civil society void of oppression, atrocity, discrimination as well as violence, based on rule of law, social justice, protecting integrity and human rights, and attaining peoples' freedoms and fundamental rights; strengthen political, social, economic as well as defense institutions and attain a prosperous life and sound living environment for all inhabitants of this land". It is also asserted in article 6 of Afghanistan's Constitution, "The state shall be obligated to create a prosperous and progressive society based on social justice, preservation of human dignity, protection of human rights, realization of democracy..." However, none of the mentioned facts have come true and those who lead a life of luxury will never feel the pain and sufferings of the poor and victims' families.

According to reports, some of the European countries have decided to deport Afghan refugees - who took risk and spent great amounts of money to breathe a sigh of relief abroad. Most probably, the decision is made on the basis of President Ghani's suggestion to send them back to Afghanistan. It comes as the families of high-ranking authorities enjoy their life abroad - far from the nation's anguish and misery. Following a trip to Sweden, President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani said that those Afghan migrants who are not accepted by the Swedish Government will be returned home. Afghan migrants' issue has been on the agenda of Ghani's official trip to European countries. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven is quoted to say, "most of the migrants who are coming to Sweden are Afghans, most of them are underage and without family which are causing serious problems for both countries, this year we have received more than 20,000 Afghan migrants came to Sweden, efforts are underway to recognize those are not permitted to live in Sweden to return to Afghanistan."

The fact is that there is no effective strategy to reduce the economic crisis or political instability. If Afghan migrants be returned home, there is neither protection nor job opportunities for them. They will have to suffer from unmitigated challenges like many other citizens or even targeted by the Taliban and ISIL militants without a serious attention from the authorities. To show their commitments to the country, first of all, Afghan officials have to bring their families home and let them live like simple citizens. Secondly, they must provide a safe environment and job opportunities for the people otherwise the migrants' return will create further challenges.

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## The 'Heart of Asia' Conference

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

President Ashraf Ghani is set to participate in a regional conference in Islamabad, in which the participants will discuss the situation in Afghanistan and explore ways on how to help the country's troubled economy as well as the peace efforts. The conference is a rare opportunity for restoring trust and improving cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the peace process in Afghanistan. Afghanistan announced a last minute confirmation of President Ghani's participation to the conference after Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif invited him to the gathering when the two leaders met at the sidelines of the COP21 Paris Climate Change Conference. After a pause in improvement of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, President Ghani's participation in the conference will help both countries to talk and explore a common ground on the Afghan peace process and security in both countries. Ahead of the conference, the diplomatic efforts shown by officials of Afghanistan and Pakistan finally did pay off as the Pakistani Prime Minister invited President Ghani which was accepted by the government of Afghanistan.

Given the fragility of the peace efforts by both Pakistan and Afghanistan and the recent tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, the conference provides a vital opportunity for both countries to settle disagreements and focus on issues related to the Afghan peace efforts and security of both countries. Pakistan has shown perseverance in convincing the Afghan government to attend the conference while Afghanistan is also welcoming any efforts that help the peace process in the country. The initiative 'Heart of Asia' conference on Afghanistan brings many leaders from the region that can play a crucial role in helping the countries to improve bilateral trade and cooperation on security issues. However, there are also challenges and problems overshadowing the conference and potentially affecting the outcome of the gathering. The conference is an opportunity for Ashraf Ghani to retry his outreach to Pakistan for seeking the country's help in brining Taliban leaders to table of negotiation. President Ashraf Ghani's overtures to Pakistan aimed for the country's help over the peace process was hampered by the sharp increase of Taliban attacks across Afghanistan after the unexpected announcement of death of the group's leader Mullah Muhammad Omar this year. Struggling to cope with the announced death of Mullah Omar and trying to prove strength of the new leader, the Taliban orchestrated a wave of attacks in Kabul and other provinces. Amidst high expectations from the improving relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the initial steps for resumption of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the announcement of Mullah Omar's death came as a spoiling incident for the fledgling Afghan peace process mediated by Pakistan.

The peace initiative was virtually put aside as a bitter power struggle arose between Taliban factions while on the other hand, the militants launched a deadly offensive against government forces. At this time of uncertainty, the government of Afghanistan, which was struggling to cope with the spring offensive of the Taliban, as well as the Pakistani government lacked a will to give a breath to the ef-

forts which once saw the resumption of peace talks between Afghan government and the Taliban in Murree of Pakistan. The wide scepticisms in both Afghanistan and Pakistan have been keeping back the two governments to do a refresh in their cooperation over the stalled Afghan peace process. There have been widespread distrusts in Afghanistan towards Pakistan's approach concerning the peace process and the country's promised help in bringing the Taliban to table of negotiation.

Despite existing challenges, the 'Heart of Asia Conference' provides Kabul and Islamabad an opportunity to overcome the mistrusts of past months and refocus on how to improve cooperation on security issues and starting peace talks with the Taliban. The conference is set to discuss a wide range of issues such as boosting the Afghan economy, the peace process in Afghanistan, improving cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan over security and bilateral trade. The potential for cooperation between the two countries is tremendous. Along with working on issues related to peace and security, the two countries need to focus more on enhancing bilateral trade and economic cooperation for both short and long term periods. The participants of the conferences are directly relevant to the potential of economic and trade partnership between Afghanistan and Pakistan. These countries can help to make this happen. In recent years, many of the regional countries including China and Russia have been showing willingness to help the peace efforts in Afghanistan as well as the Kabul-Islamabad relations. Afghanistan and Pakistan need to look at the potential of bilateral and regional trade as well as the regional consensus on resolving the conflict in Afghanistan. The two countries not only need to make sure that the current level of cooperation over the Afghan peace process will not degrade, but also should work on improving bilateral trade and security partnership. For this to happen, the 'Heart of Asia Conference' is a genuine opportunity to overcome differences and mistrusts and build on the cooperation that already exist between the two countries.

There will substantial challenges ahead. The continued militant attacks in Afghanistan have time and again disrupted cooperation between Kabul and Islamabad on the Afghan peace process. It may do so in the future. Both Kabul and Islamabad have reasserted their determinations to improve security and cooperating over peace process in Afghanistan. Given this, the two countries will need to ensure that they will continue to work together and build on the works done for starting the peace process in Afghanistan. On the Pakistani side, the government needs to realize that it should genuinely listen to the demands of the Afghan government for convincing the militants to cease the terrorist attacks. Pakistan needs to ensure that no government or military circles in the country support the militant groups. The two countries can move forward on security issues and peace process in Afghanistan only by making genuine political compromises and heeding to each other's calls. The 'Heart of Asia' conference in Islamabad is the right venue for making such compromises and listening differently to each other.

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