

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



December 17, 2015

14th Prime Ministers' Meeting of SCO

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah attended the 14th prime ministers' meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in China on Tuesday and Wednesday, where Afghanistan participated as an observer country and the CEO was able to have some important sideline meetings.

SCO summit was basically founded in 2001 by the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Afghanistan was given an observer status at the 2012 SCO summit in Beijing on June 6, 2012. Pakistan and India have been granted full membership status as well, while Iran and Mongolia, like Afghanistan, have observer status in the organization.

Before CEO Abdullah's visit some MP's even suggested that Afghanistan should also request for a full membership in the organization, but no formal declaration of such a request has been made by Abdullah. Afghanistan's relations with regional countries are undoubtedly very important. If it wants to be successful in the post withdrawal era, it has to tighten the ties will be the regional countries particularly, with China and Russia. Full membership of SCO can support Afghanistan in having better role in the Organization and at the same time take more advantages of cooperation and interdependence with the member countries.

CEO Abdullah managed to meet Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on the sidelines of the Conference and discussed bilateral relations and improving of ties between the two countries. Both the leaders discussed that Russia and Afghanistan has good relations and this can be developed further in economic sections. And both countries face common challenges which need for joint cooperation and aside from these challenges, there are opportunities that both countries can use.

The Russian prime minister called Afghanistan a good neighbor and said that in the past Afghanistan was a strategic ally to Russia. He said that his country wants to improve this friendship.

Meanwhile, Abdullah also met with the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, Vijay Kumar Singh and discussed Afghanistan and India relations. During the meeting, Abdullah called India a good friend of Afghanistan and acknowledged India's help in the past few years and in providing Afghanistan with helicopters. Abdullah said that helping Afghanistan's air force was a good step for consolidation of the relation of both sides and hoped that such efforts take place in future.

There is no doubt in the fact that Afghanistan is going through some very serious challenges regarding growing insecurity nowadays. Taliban insurgents have continued their fighting more fiercely and they have been able to gain the control of different districts in different provinces of the country. The northern parts of the country that used to be comparatively peaceful are now the main targets of the insurgents and certain districts in Kunduz and Badakhshan have come under their control. In recent weeks, even the capital Kabul has experienced some very threatening attacks even in the most guarded parts of the city.

At the same time, the threats of growing number of Daesh recruits are also alarming. In order to face the dual challenge of fighting both Taliban and Daesh, Afghanistan would definitely require support from the regional countries, in particular. The SCO members can play a positive role in this regard and their dedicated attention regarding the growing insecurity in Afghanistan is of immense importance. Both Russia and China have accepted the fact that the growth of Daesh in Afghanistan can be a regional threat, and they have also emphasized on a strategy to combat this threat. If this emphasis is turned into practical steps, it would immensely support in disheartening Daesh's growth in Afghanistan.

In similar fashion, to control the threat of Taliban and to support Afghanistan in making peace talks successful with them, the worth of regional countries cannot be denied. Afghanistan, to a large extent, has relied on the role of Pakistan in this regard. President Ghani since the beginning of his government has strived for improved relations with Pakistan and emphasized on its role in holding peace talks with Taliban. Pakistan on the other hand has shown willingness in this regard as well. Few days earlier, during the Heart of Asia Conference in Islamabad the leaders from Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to restart the peace process that had faced stalemate after the talks in Murree. There are hopes that the process may restart with a new zeal and commitment. It is also important that both the countries come closer to each other through SCO platform, provided that Afghanistan is able to acquire permanent membership.

It is really imperative for the regional countries to see the problem of insecurity in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a collective issue and must cooperate so that the issue is addressed properly and on time. They seem to realize that they require acting collectively to face this threat but it is important that they must be able to put in practice comprehensive strategy to tackle the situation. Words and promises alone have never and would never solve the issue of terrorism and insurgency. Practical solutions are the only way out of the quagmire that can swallow the whole region in no time.



Human Rights Violation is a Matter of Concern

By Hujjatullah Zia

A number of standard individual rights are significant to ethnic and religious minorities, including rights to freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and freedom from discrimination. Human rights documents also include rights that refer to minorities explicitly and give them special protections. For example, the Civil and Political Covenant in Article 27 says that persons belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities "shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language."

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, on Friday condemned the ongoing inter-communal violence and expressed deep concern at the increasing use of sectarian language in the Central African Republic (CAR), warning that this could have dramatic consequences.

"I strongly condemn the incitement of violence and provocation of inter-communal tensions by some armed groups and political leaders. This could very easily lead to yet another wave of targeted attacks in the country," the High Commissioner said. "...The increasing tendency among Christians and Muslims to organize in self-defense groups and to exclude any person not considered part of their community is deeply worrying".

A new wave of inter-communal violence has killed at least 130 people and injured 430 since the end of September. Eleven cases of sexual and gender-based violence were also documented. Attacks against personnel of the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSCA) and international troops in several parts of the country are also on the rise.

"The establishment of the Special Criminal Court will be a very important step to ensure accountability," said the High Commissioner, who urged MINUSCA to increase its assistance for national investigations and prosecutions. He also called on the international community to increase its financial support.

The High Commissioner warned armed group members and their leaders responsible for serious violations of human rights law and of international humanitarian law that one day they will be prosecuted by national or international courts and brought to justice.

A first human rights report by MINUSCA and OHCHR issued shows that, despite a general improvement during the reporting period, human rights violations continued on a daily basis in CAR between September 2014 and May 2015. At least 785 people, including 88 women and 43 children, were victims of human rights violations in CAR, including killings, torture, abductions, sexual violence and hostage-taking. The report also notes that these violations were mainly the result of armed groups' ability to operate freely throughout parts of the country and the culture of impunity.

Internally displaced persons appeared to be particularly vulnerable to violations, with the elderly and the children being disproportionately affected.

It is self-explanatory that the flagrant violation of human rights and dignity are rampant around the globe. The armed insurgents spill the blood of innocent civilians on the grounds of their creed, color, sect and sex. Women are subjugated to men in patriarchal societies and child labor from the break of dawn to the fall of dusk in poverty-stricken countries. Similarly, the ethnic minority groups suffer sectarian violence triggered by terrorists - who also sow the seeds of fear and mistrust between East and West via infiltrating to Western countries.

The violent practices of religious extremists play the role of a two-edged sword for Muslim Ummah which harms them from double sides. Firstly, Islamic world bear the brunt of insurgency. As a result, Syrians are burning amidst violence and bloodshed, Iraq was changed into the hotbed of self-styled Islamic State in the wake of downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime, a large number of civilians - mainly the religious minority groups - fall prey to insurgency in Pakistan and Afghan nation undergoes militancy carried out by the Taliban outfits and members of the Islamic State (IS) group.

Secondly, the militants' cruelties, which are done under the aegis of religion, stigmatize Muslims in Western countries. In another item, their acts of violence reflect a negative outlook about Muslims and they are held in contempt, maligned and mistreated in public places.

Hence, Muslims' rights and dignity are trampled upon not only by the armed insurgents but also by the sufferers of terrorism. In a nutshell, Muslims are the very scapegoats of the terrorist groups. It is hoped that the Special Criminal Court will bring the heads of the militant groups to justice and prevent from the violation of rights which take place in any corners of the world.

It is further hoped and prayed that the international community will decrease the pain and suffering of mankind and put an end to the current violence and bloodshed going on around the globe. Hopefully, the day will come that the blood of Palestinian children will not be spilled on their own land, Houthis will not be bombarded for voicing their rights, Yazidi women will not fall victim to honor-killings on the grounds of their beliefs.

It will have to be noted that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." The outrageous acts of inhumanity and barbarous acts of terrorism should be curbed by the world in one way or another and mankind must be considered equal irrespective of their ethnic or religious backgrounds.

Hujjatullah Zia is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at zia_hujjat@yahoo.com

A Project of Peace and Stability

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Eventually after around two decades since it was first proposed, works on the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran (TAPI) gas pipeline project started last Sunday. The project is one of the biggest economic projects between Central and South Asian region, boosting prospects for trade and economic cooperation between the countries involved as well as peace and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Officials of all four stakeholder countries have hailed the project as 'game changer', 'peace project' and 'the dream project' both for the region and the countries involved in the project. The gas pipeline project is expected to complete in four years and will cost around \$10 billion. The project will transport 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmenistan's gas over 1814 kilometers through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. Suggesting the beginning of a new chapter in relations with Turkmenistan, Pakistan and India, President Ashraf Ghani said, "Today we witness a historical event; we talked about for decades; today we demonstrated our commitment."

The project will be immensely lucrative for all the involved countries. Construction of the pipeline will create thousands of jobs in Afghanistan and will contribute to economic development of the country. Explaining the various economic projects in Afghanistan as part of the major TAPI project, President Ghani said that the gas pipeline will be part of a multi-branch project including optical fiber, power transmission and railways. The project's management is carried out by Turkmenistan's state-run Turkmen Gas. France's Total had initially expressed interest to take over the management of the consortium, but after Turkmenistan rejected the company's bid for extracting the country's gas reserves, it withdrew from participating in the project. According to officials, Indian and Pakistani companies have signed contracts to import gas from Turkmenistan for the next 30 years.

The inauguration of the project is as fulfillment of dreams for all involving countries as they immensely need the pipeline project. The project was at the center of what was once called 'the big game' among some major world multi-national companies for exploiting the extractive reserves of the Central Asia. The TAPI project is bypassing Iran-Turkmenistan Peace Pipeline which was supposed to pass from Iran into the South Asian states. The economic initiative is drummed as pipeline diplomacy for the region aimed at boosting stability in the region and help peace in the region. Economic cooperation both with Pakistan and the region is one of the key ambitions of the Afghan national unity government. The Afghan government hopes the TAPI project and trade and business cooperation in other areas would boost relations between regional countries particularly Pakistan and will encourage Islamabad in the long run to help maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Though the project's foundation was laid out during president Karzai's presidency, the national unity government was staunch supporter of the initiative aimed at larger regional integration and economic cooperation. Ashraf Ghani's administration's policy has been seeking

peace and stability in the country through promoting Afghanistan as an economic hub in the region connecting the South and Central Asian regions and expanding trades and economic cooperation between the regional countries. The Afghan government has been struggling to find ways to end the longstanding conflict in the country and end poverty which is one of the main factors behind the war and violence in the country. TAPI pipeline project is one of the key economic projects that will benefit Afghanistan's economy immensely at a time when the country needs funding to provide jobs and economic welfare and sustain its military and governance spending. The government of Afghanistan will collect millions of dollars in revenue each year for passage of the Turkmenistan's gas to the South Asian countries. On the other hand, the project is expected to create thousands of direct jobs inside Afghanistan easing the country's urgent need for providing employment for its citizens.

However, the project is facing huge challenges. Insecurity in the western and southern regions of Afghanistan as well as some parts of Pakistan is one of the key challenges against it. The pipeline will pass through areas of the provinces of Herat, Helmand and Kandahar in Afghanistan, to Quetta and Multan in Pakistan, and finally ends in Fazilka of India. The pipeline route in Afghanistan and Pakistan passes through provinces that are highly volatile and some very insecure. There are occasional activities of militant groups operating against the government.

Securing the project will be a major test for determination of the countries implementing the project. Pakistan and Afghanistan see the project as instrumental for peace, security and socio-development in the regions lying on the project's route. Afghanistan hopes that launch of the project will provide incentives for regional countries especially for Pakistan to demonstrate more commitment to the security of the project and help improving security in Afghanistan.

Political cooperation among the regional countries involved in the project is crucial for success of the project. Afghanistan, Pakistan and India need to work together to expand relations aimed at boosting trade and economic cooperation. Only through improved bilateral relations the countries involved in the project will be able cooperate based on long-term interests centered at economic cooperation. India and Pakistan are both highly energy thirsty countries. These highly populous countries are in urgent need of the Central Asian energy reserves and only accessing to Central Asian energy reserves can resolve the energy needs of these countries. Being as crossroads for the two South and Central Asian regions, Afghanistan has the exceptional inter-connectivity advantage in the region.

Despite the security challenges, the immense interest from the project for the stakeholder countries is a sufficient reason for the project to succeed. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan have the chance to test a new phase of relations based on economic cooperation around the TAPI project.

Abdul Ahad Bahrami is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at ahad.bahrami@gmail.com



Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Hussain Yasa

Vice-Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

www.outlookafghanistan.net



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