

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



December 20, 2015

Sacrifices of Afghan Forces and Peace Talks

In a statement, on Saturday December 19, 2015, after the inauguration of new building for Ministry of Interior, President Ashraf Ghani stated that the sacrifices and achievements of the Afghan National Security Forces would not be forgotten in the peace talks with Taliban. He also assured security forces that their presence, professionalism and independence will be taken into account during peace negotiations. Stressing the need for stability in the country, he said peace is a priority for all Afghans and that the war has been imposed on the country. He said government is trying to leave no stone unturned in bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. Ghani thanked all security force members for their sacrifices which have helped secure the country, and particularly thanked the families of women police officers for having allowed them to join the ranks.

Though he has emphasized on the peace process, he has recently made it clear that the process would not be carried out at the altar of Afghan constitution and the sacrifices of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The important factor to consider is what would be position of Afghan government when it starts negotiations with Taliban at a time when Taliban seem to have gained much strength. In recent months Afghanistan has seen deterioration in the security situation to a large extent. Taliban have been able to establish their dominance in few of Afghan provinces; and in certain northern districts, for the first time, they have been able to show their astonishing strength. The fall of Kunduz to Taliban was another major example showing how they have reorganized and prepared themselves to carry out complex attacks. The attack also raised concerns about the capability of Afghan government and security forces to ensure security of the people.

As the concerns were mounting regarding the future of peace and tranquility in the country, Barrack Obama announced that US would delay the drawdown of its troops. He announced that the current posture of troops - 9,800 - would stay in the country through the end of 2016. He also announced that a total of 5,500 soldiers would stay in Afghanistan after 2016, when he leaves office.

It seems that US is really concerned about the situation in Afghanistan and it shows that it is interested in monitoring the situation closely. However, the important thing is to pursue a peace process that may guarantee a lasting peace in the country. US has been supporting such a peace process but that has not been successful yet. Since the peace talks hosted by Pakistan in Murree, there has not been any sort of development. In the recent Heart of Asia Conference Pakistani government again announced its support for peace talks with Taliban, and President Ashraf Ghani also agreed to restart the peace process, but there are doubts among the Afghan officials regarding Pakistan's intentions. 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.

It is important that US along with the regional powers must monitor the peace talks and ensure that they do it for the better future of the people of Afghanistan, not for their own political and strategic interests. With the support and involvement of US and the countries like Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India, a lasting peace can be developed in Afghanistan.

For Afghanistan to enter the peace talks from a position of strength, it is necessary that ANSF must be further strengthened. It is a good sign that US forces will remain in the country for a couple of more years, but important point is to make use of this presence to a maximum extent. NATO has also welcomed Obama's decision and it will also keep its forces in the country for some more years. However, there should be practical efforts to ensure that this presence benefit ANSF as much as possible.

Following President Obama's decision regarding its troops, Germany also gave willingness to keep its troops in Afghanistan. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel strongly welcomed President Obama's plans to prolong the troops' engagement in Afghanistan. The role and support of international community in Afghanistan are of immense importance. As the security challenges are rising with the attacks of Taliban and rise of Islamic State (IS) militants, the security measures and apparatus in the country will be highly tested; and they can only be successful when the unconditional support continues for them. The only condition that can be set is the restoration of peace and tranquility; before that, drawdown of the troops may mean isolation of Afghanistan in the quagmire of instability and terrorism.

At the same time, it is important that Afghan government must enter the peace process from such a point that there are no compromises made regarding Afghan constitution. The contributions by the Afghan people in general and security forces in particular must not be lost in any way and there should be determined efforts to safeguard them during the talks with Taliban. Compromises in those areas would mean a defeat for Afghan government.



The Worsening Humanitarian Conditions in Afghanistan

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

With the war and insurgency in the country going on unabatedly, Afghanistan is facing a deteriorating humanitarian crisis. A large portion of the Afghan civilians suffer hardships and misery such as day-to-day violence, insecurity, poverty, displacements and lack basic living requirements. Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) says that based on its assessment internal displacements in the country has increased while number of refugees voluntarily returning from Iran and Pakistan has drastically reduced. According to Sima Samar, the chairwoman of the commission, a staggering 1.2 million Afghans were displaced internally this year due to the ongoing conflict and deteriorating security situation across the country. Samar said the number of internally displaced people this year constituted more than four percent of the country's population and was five times higher than in the year 2009. According to the head of the Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), internally displaced Afghans live in camps lacking basic facilities such as drinking water, hygiene and sanitation. On the other hand, the AIHRC officials say hundreds of Afghan refugees are deported forcefully and without any prior notice from neighboring countries.

This year was a particular year in Afghanistan with the militant groups waging an unprecedented campaign of violence since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001. There was a high rate of civilian casualties along with tolls from the armed forces fighting the Taliban and other insurgent groups. The Taliban managed to expand their insurgency across the country particularly into the northern and central parts of the country while intensifying their campaign of violence in eastern and southern parts of the country. In addition to the increased militancy in the country, there is now an amalgamation of militant groups operating across the country. The militancy in Afghanistan was compounded by emergence of many more dangerous and warring militant groups. All these led to further bloodshed and violence in the country. Afghan civilians' share of the war tolls and victims is has been enormous. There is a staggering increase in civilian casualties. Despite that both government forces and the militant groups are responsible for the sharp rise of civilian tolls, a high percentage of the civilian suffering are attributed to the militant groups. The Taliban and other insurgents are accused of deliberately targeting civilians in the battlefields, villages and the insecure highways across the country. Despite the Taliban's claimed policy of avoiding targeting innocent people in the conflict, militant fighters belonging to different groups have deliberately or randomly targeted civilians. The kidnapping of civilians on the highways found a gruesome dimension this year with ordinary passengers being kidnapped after being identified to belonging to specific minority groups.

Responsible for defending and protecting civilians, the Afghan government has largely fallen short of efficiently protecting the civilians and providing security for the civilian population. Despite the bravery and capabilities of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), there

were many shortcomings on the government's part in defending the country against the militants' offensives. Political disagreements over power sharing issues left the ministry of defense without a minister for more than a year. On the other hand, while the militants managed to wage the war in many fronts and expand their insurgency to many more areas that previously were relatively secure, the government lacked effective war leadership and reacted based on occurrence of security incidents across the country.

This led to further expansion of the insurgency in different parts of the country, and to areas that were relatively secure before. As the AIHRC officials announced, a record number of Afghans were displaced both internally and to other countries this year. The deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is particularly highlighted this year by a record number of Afghan youths leaving the country in search of security and better lives in European countries. There have been efforts by the government to curb the flow of people leaving the country by tacitly and openly calling on the destination nations to send the refugees back. Rather helping to resolve the worsening humanitarian situation in the country, such an approach has triggered bitter criticisms to the government and sent a shockwave among the refugees who have gambled their lives for reach Europe. The pressures were to the extent that the government officials were compelled to deny any government collusion with the European countries to send Afghan refugees back.

With the deteriorating security situation in the country, hundreds of thousands of Afghans are displaced to relatively more secure areas in the country, while many are forced to live in camps and temporary shelters. This is while many more are seeking to stay in neighboring countries despite the countries' systematic mistreatment of the Afghan refugees. Initially, a considerable number of Afghans living in Iran and Pakistan were returning with the hope to see their lives changed and find employments in the country. However, due to the economic challenges and lack of employment for the working Afghans, the trend reversed, and now more people are trying to get out of the country compared to those wanting to return the country. In such a desperate situation, no short-term plans would ease the worsening humanitarian conditions in the country.

Afghanistan's humanitarian problem cannot be resolved without addressing the root causes of the challenges affecting day-to-day lives of the citizens. The government needs to devise a comprehensive plan for protecting the people in the cities, towns and villages and helping them to get employment. Short-term measures aimed at appeasing specific groups of people would not work in resolving the challenges. The government needs to convince the public of its will, efficiency and capability in restoring security and creating jobs opportunities. It must demonstrate a great will for improving governance and fighting corruption at highest level. Regaining public confidence would help the government to address the economic and security challenges with more rigor and efficiency.

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A Surge of Religious Intolerance

By Hujjatullah Zia

A sense of religious intolerance and sectarian violence have surfaced in US and France following the deadly attacks carried out by members of self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Paris and California which left dozens dead and wounded behind. Muslim Americans encounter abusive remarks while presenting in public with Islamic hijab or traditional way of clothing or growing beard. The Holy Mosques are desecrated in US as the pig's head is thrown upon and shut down, alongside some prayer rooms, in France to take precautionary measures.

It is believed that the nature of democracy is freedom - freedom of speech, religion, beliefs, etc. - therefore one is entitled to practice his/her religious rituals without fear. Similarly, discrimination against minority groups on the grounds of one's criminal acts, which happens to belong to the same religious group, has no logical basis.

Perhaps the Americans have forgotten the Kandahar massacre when the US Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bales murdered sixteen civilians, including nine children, and wounded six others in the Panjwayi District of Kandahar province, on March 11, 2012. Similarly, on January 2012, US and UN officials described a video clip of US marines urinating on dead Afghans as "disgusting" and "inhuman" - according to BBC report.

However, American and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) authorities only offered their apology for the tragic murder of Kandahar. Following the incident, the Taliban launched an attack on an Afghan government delegation which was visiting the site of the killings on 13 March, murdering one Afghan soldier and injuring three - after calling the Afghan soldiers complicit in the Kandahar attack. Hence, Afghans suffered from both sides - as Muslims do in the present. In spite of the ugly episodes, Afghans called neither Christians nor American "terrorist" and the Americophobia was not as strong as the Islamophobia going on in the United States. It is believed that if the terrorist groups could spark tension between Islam and West, they would have achieved their goal.

US President Barack Obama asked Americans not to turn against Muslims after the Paris and California attacks, but rather work with the Muslim-American community in fighting homegrown extremism. He warned Americans not to depict the fight against terrorism as a war between Islam and America as doing so would harm both. Moreover, he urged Muslim leaders to work with the rest of the world to decisively defeat the ideology of terror. "Muslim leaders here and around the globe have to continue working with us to decisively and unequivocally reject the hateful ideol-

ogy that groups like ISIL and Al Qaeda promote," Obama is cited as saying.

He reminded Americans that extremists "account for a tiny fraction" of more than a billion Muslims around the world. He also noted that there were millions of patriotic Muslims in America who also reject the "hateful ideology" of groups like IS and Al Qaeda.

The extremists "are thugs and killers, part of a cult of death," said the US president while pointing out that the vast majority of terrorist victims around the world were Muslim. "If we are to succeed in defeating terrorism we must enlist Muslim communities as some of our strongest allies, rather than push them away through suspicion and hate," he said.

He urged Muslim leaders across the world "to speak out against not just acts of violence, but also those interpretations of Islam that are incompatible with the values of religious tolerance, mutual respect, and human dignity".

However, following the recent California mass murders, Donald Trump has called for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the US "until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on". It is said that after the 9/11 tragedy, large numbers of the American public switched to driving cars for long trips instead of flying. Statistically, the risk of dying from a car accident was about 60 times greater than the risk of dying in an airplane accident. It has been estimated that the fear of flying led to over a 100 extra deaths in car accidents monthly. According to Tribune Express editorial, deaths by terrorism are a tiny percentage of total deaths by firearms. Suicide: 19,800; murder: 10,500; mass shootings: 462; right wing terrorists: 12; Muslim terrorists: 19. It adds that dogs kill six times more people than terrorists in the US, and bathtub falls kill 100 times more, but we do not declare war on dogs or bathtubs. "Since 9/11, there have been a total of 52 incidents of religious terrorism in the US, of which 27 were created by FBI entrapment. The response to terrorism has been so far out of proportion as to be mindboggling." It further cites a source that "the US response to 9/11 has cost \$3.3 trillion. Strangely, there is no mention of the human cost of millions of civilian lives destroyed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, the ISIL or Daesh are not the only ones with bloodlust for killing random innocents; US Senator Ted Cruz has promised to avenge San Bernardino by bombing the Middle East until the sand glows in the dark." Recent polls by Pew show that across the globe, Muslims are overwhelmingly opposed to the Islamic State. Hence, it is hoped that Muslims - who bear the brunt of terrorism - will not fall victim to religious intolerance in western countries anymore.

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