

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



December 24, 2014

The Final Wakeup Call

For too long both the Pakistani and Afghan governments have been pursuing efforts of talks with the terrorists who have, in return, brought about unforgettable sorrows and miseries in the lives of even the common people. The recent attack in Peshawar, Pakistan that killed 148 students and staff members of a military school left no doubt that Taliban militants are not interested in talks. In response to this massacre, leaders around the world, from Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani to U.S president Barack Obama stood by Pakistani government against these terrorist fighters to be eliminated and condemned the attack in the strongest possible terms, saying that this was the worst massacre in the history of Pakistan, against innocent children and a senseless and cold-blooded act of terror by the Tahrir-e-Taliban and shared their solidarity and feeling of sorrows with the families of 148 innocent souls. Of course, civilians have neither the authority nor the power to take a responsive step but to helplessly cry upon the dead bodies of their beloved souls. They have trusted upon the reasonable promises of the authorities to protect their states and their lives and unfortunately they have been disappointed.

The Attack horrified the entire region, especially Afghanistan that has been going through the negative effects of terrorism for decades. The attack in Peshawar is tragic and unlikely to be the last, rather threats the whole region. But the region stands on the cusp of a potentially game-changing transformation in which the Afghan and Pakistan governments understand that their interests are best served working together rather than undermining each other. Instead of shelling rockets on each other's territories, it is more reasonable to join hands in eliminating their common enemy - the terrorism. This is a reminder that the militant movements across Pakistan and Afghanistan are in the rise to the beginning of another devastation in South Asia and poses a great threat to Afghanistan in particular. Evidently, these terrorist groups had carried out dozens of similar deadly terrorist attacks against civilians, security officials and foreigners in both south Asian states in the last couple of months that have taken the lives of dozens of innocent souls. The Afghan Taliban, similarly, have launched a bloody wave of urban violence in Kabul, including other major cities, by targeting innocent children, locals, government employees, aid workers and foreigners. In Pakistan, though casualties reached at nearly 12,000 in 2009, they have remained between 5,000 and 6,000 every year since. A similar number of Afghans were killed and wounded in the first half of 2014 alone, up 24% compared with the same period in 2013, according to the UN reports released earlier. Of global attacks last month, 28% took place in Afghanistan or Pakistan, a recent study found. Iraq and Syria accounted for half.

In September, Al-Qaeda announced the formal establishment of the South Asian affiliate for which the South Asian leaders have not shown any reasonable reaction. Despite all these terrorist groups are different in their brutal movements and are not organizationally connected, they do share certain characteristics beyond the broad principles of so-called violent extremism. Inevitably, they target where they realize that the government authorities are weak against such illegal fighters or steeped in corruption, in the drug-trafficking heartlands of Afghanistan, slums in provincial Bangladeshi cities, in the rugged hills around Peshawar, or the un-policed no-go zones of Karachi, Pakistan's commercial capital and enjoy high profile terrorist attacks against civilians in the heart of capital, Kabul where the police forces are corrupt. Video report released by TOLO, a local Afghan television last month showed that there were no police force at the checkpoints at nights in the heart of capital, Kabul. As a result, the whole region is steeped in bloodshed and mourning. Over the past decade or more, analysts have sought to determine the centre of gravity of militant Islamic activism. Some have argued for the Middle East, for Afghanistan, for Pakistan and even for the West. But with the resurgence of violence across such a wide swath of territory, last month a bomb attack on the Grand Mosque in the Nigerian city of Kano, 5,000 miles from Peshawar, killed 120 people, reassuring idea that there is one specific battleground where the more general counter-terrorist campaign might be won is looking far-fetched. When in January and February 2013, twin bombings killed at least 180 Shiite Hazaras in Baluchistan, Pakistan's response was that it was an unfortunate targeting of a minority group. When in May 2010, an Ahmadi Mosque was blown up in Lahore, killing around a hundred people, the response was the same. However, there have not been concrete steps to control the situation and now the Taliban insurgents have hit hard, showing that they have free hands to do whatever they want.

Now, it is time for both Pakistan and Afghanistan to tackle the situation of growing terrorism seriously, be honest in their efforts and must cooperate with each other instead of continuing the blame game as, ultimately, it would be the people and the government of both the countries that would suffer as a result of growing terror.

Letter to Editor

"US Firm Finds Malware Targeting Visitors to Afghan Govt. Websites"

Dear Editor
With regard to the news titled "US Firm Finds Malware Targeting Visitors to Afghan Govt. Websites" carried on December 22nd, 2014, which said that malicious software likely linked to China is being used to infect visitors to a wide range of Afghan official government websites for information. The Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan would like to make clarifications on this issue, so as to avoid any misunderstanding.

Cyber attacks are almost always anonymous and difficult to attribute. It is untenable that some foreign company accused China on cyber-crimes and attacks based on the specious evidence produced by them. China is a victim of cyber-crimes and attacks as well as a staunch defender of cyber-security. China opposes cyber-attack and Internet terrorism of all forms and any country or individual using facilities in another country to launch cyber-attacks against a third country, and actively promotes the international cooperation on cyber-security based on equality, mutual respect and mutual benefit. In 2011, China, Russia and other countries submitted the Drafted International Code of Conduct for Information Security to the General Assembly of United Nations, with a view of promoting the constructive and responsible behaviors of all countries, and enhancing their cooperation in addressing the common threats and challenges in information space. Over the past years, China has conducted effective consultations and cooperation on cyber-security with relative countries. China stands ready to make joint efforts with the international community to safeguard peace, security, openness and cooperation in the cyberspace.

Best Regards
YANG Guowei
Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan



Accepting and Respecting Ethnic Differences

By Muhammad Rasool Shah

Until and unless a person comes out of the environment he lives in, he would never come to discover the beauties that are found in different environments in different parts of the world. There is present a specific community or group in our society who have enjoyed for many decades the prosperity being drawn from their successful businesses. The more they know about the world and its progress, the more they become confident and so bring more and more expansion in their business. This gallant trait has also been transferred to their children and one feels really surprised to see that a boy in his late teens is visiting a foreign country to make bulk purchases for the company or business organization of his father or family.

Many years ago, I read an interesting joke that described how people from different countries did not know about the people of the rest of the world. People from different countries were asked to give their opinion about a global problem of famine and malnutrition mostly grappling the poor nations of Asia and Africa. Some of the people did not know about famine, some did not know about the fact of malnutrition, and some did not know about the poor nations of Asia and Africa. It is also stated that American government knows too much about the countries of the world but majority of its population doesn't know about different nations of the world and even its neighboring nations. Anyhow, my aim of this explanation was to highlight the importance of knowledge and problems being created by ignorance. Ignorance or lack of knowledge narrows our mind and approach while it is a universal strategy of Sufis that meeting different people with varying behaviors and attitudes would broaden your horizon and make you more passionate and add good traits to your personality and behavior. Having a look at the increase of differences among the people of different backgrounds like cultures, religious sects, races, colors and languages and its resultant complexities and problems is also an issue closely linked with the idea expressed above. For many centuries, we have lived with complete harmony, ignoring all the differences or even if the differences existed, we were good enough to accept and live with them but on many occasions, strange and rather painful attitude of people based on the differences mentioned earlier, brings in mind so many alarming consequences that may be born out of this inadvertent and heedless behavior.

A friend of mine came from a European country and among his numerous observations, an observation was really fascinating to me. He told that in the country he lived, there were people from almost all the corners of the world and they had all the differences between them. There, these differences are taken as normal and treated normally. In fact, such differences have added more beauty to the society. When the differences are treated in this manner, they not only close the door of any kind of conflict but they also bring more maturity, vastness and broadness in the perceptions and attitudes of people. At the same time, they are more careful in not hurting the feelings of others and this concern and sensitivity is really a marvelous achievement because this has made every person a concerned and careful member of this heterogeneous society. It doesn't mean that all the European or developed countries and societies have completely solved all the problems stemming from the differences among its members. We repeatedly hear about the discriminations present in these societies as well and its recent exam-

ple was the mistreatment of one of the richest and most powerful women of the world, Oprah Winfrey, in Switzerland where she was treated differently on the basis of her skin color. Then we discussed about the problems arising due to the differences among people and which are gradually increasing. Now, it is not a new or strange reality that people in Afghanistan attack and scold the members or leaders of other groups on social networking sites. I have mentioned before as well that those leaders or elders who are dear to the masses of their group or community should be treated very gently and politely as a small insult may infuse a large scaled hatred among the large number of members of the both the communities and groups. Till now, these issues were being carried clandestinely but thanks to our negative utilization of useful social networking sites that this fire of differences is getting more fuel with every passing day. Almost a month ago, the debate of rather mentioning or not mentioning the ethnicities on national identity cards came as a fresh challenge to our collective social behaviors and unfortunately, we were not able to address this issue as finely as was needed.

Talking on the issue, a parliamentarian used very impolite words against an ethnic group which started a fresh round of criticism from the members of both the groups and till recently, it was the most battled issue on Facebook and some other social networking sites. Keeping aside the impacts of social networking sites, people also got divided in their daily conversations and we witnessed some incidents of bitter disagreements. I am not here to judge the comments of the parliamentarian or give my opinion in the favor of any ethnic group but I am sure history will record it as a day when our mismanagement of the issue gave basis to even more severe drifting factors. My friend was also surprised to see that how people were rigid in accepting the differences and how they reared these differences and made an issue to create problems to themselves. My assessment of the situation may seem to be a bit exaggerated to many but in one of my recent visits to Quetta city of Pakistan, I witnessed how the hatred had engulfed the city resulting in the continuous genocide of a certain minority group based on ethnic and sectarian differences. You might have yourself witnessed it or may have listened from others that those who traveled and observed other societies, there were some positive changes in their opinions regarding differences in people. Not only this, they learnt how it was important to be considerate about the feelings and emotions of others which resulted in the prevention of any kind of conflict, be it on a small or large scale. Our brothers and countrymen, who become too much violent and senseless about the differences among them, needs to be taken out of this limited scope environment so that they should see that how differences are dealt with and how the same differences can be turned into a positive power. Though it seems impractical that we should take all the Afghans abroad to make them witness the societies with harmony but we would definitely be able to promote any such feeling with the help of books, containing the stories of mutual and combined success and use the media as a platform to promote common grounds and assert the importance of unity among the different groups of society.

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Poor Education System

By Hujjatullah Zia

Based on a survey, "Focusing on getting children in school, particularly girls, and keeping them there seemed appropriate looking at early enrolment figures. In 2001, fewer than one million Afghan children went to school. Since, their number has increased to 8.5 million in 2012/2013 (5.2 million boys and 3.3 million girls). However, over one million of those enrolled are permanently absent. And still "only 55% of children of primary school age are attending school."

Staff at Kabul University says they do not have "a single Afghani for its central library," and neither do faculties have money to stock their own, smaller libraries, and the same applies to provincial universities' libraries.

A look at the running-costs budget for higher education with one of the finance managers at the ministry shows why. Reportedly, the running costs budget comes in three pots. The largest portion of around 37,898,400 million dollars is set aside mostly for salaries. The second pot of 30,792,400 US dollars mostly covers the costs for dormitories, food for students, furniture, water, electricity, etc. The third pot of 215,332 US dollars covers smaller purchases or repairs.

It is the second part of the budget that, in a sub-category, details a budget for purchasing books. It is a tiny pot, with 34,453 dollars for all 34 Afghan universities - thus basically allotting 1,000 dollars to each university for purchasing books. And no regulation obliges universities to actually spend the money on books. They could spend it on other items in this sub-category such as stationary, boards and the like or redirect it to requirements of the larger pot - possibly using it to pay power bills or maintain dorms. Reliance on often random donations leaves libraries largely meaningless for students as the books do not fit professors' lectures or the exams students face at the end of the semester.

A researcher quotes assistant head librarian Homayun as, "We do not have enough new books. We do not have enough copies of new books. We do not have enough books in Dari and Pashto. And our students' English is not good enough to really understand the books we have in English."

The largest barrier to new and better textbooks and other up-to-date resources for students is language, though. There is little quality material available in Dari or Pashto while students' but also professors' English is often too patchy to rely on English-language material. Material in English, however, is being promoted widely by the international community, simply because most international advisors helping to reform the sector either are native English speakers or are used to working in English.

This is not helpful in a system that suffers from a lack of English skills and in a country where around 50 per cent of all Afghans do not even read and write Dari or Pashto.

In some faculties, teachers are, since last year, directed to teach whole courses in English. This applies particularly to courses of study that the ministry and donors have identified as 'priority fields': engineering, computer sciences, medicine and public policy and administration. Teaching in English had already been suggested in the 2005 UNESCO development plan for the Ministry of Higher Education. But it must also be credited to former President Hamed Karzai's repeated requests to teach courses in English "to facilitate economic development." Karzai cited India, Iran and Pakistan as examples of countries "that have made huge advances in medicine and other important fields through such an international focus on learning."

A researcher predicts that while looking ahead into such a desirable future with Afghan graduates competing on the world stage, it seems to have been simply overlooked that today's Afghan students are just not there yet - and might not be for another ten years. It is because the English teaching in primary and secondary schools is still rudimentary and often produces students who are only able to say what their name is and where they come from.

Afghanistan's future depends on the workforce it is building now. Not all young Afghans need a university degree to be useful, but those who do go to university should graduate as experts in their fields. This is currently not the case, also because there are, for most courses of study, few up-to-date resources in languages students understand. The higher education reform efforts of the past years have created the paradox that what is taught in many new buildings and new faculties is still 'old hat'. Over all, many professors are busy with multi-tasks and therefore attend universities as a sub-profession. Moreover, on the one hand they have lost their interests in teaching for having it a regular duty for 20 or more years, on the other hand the retired professors are still busy with teaching so as not to miss their salaries.

"The Afghan government should contribute by increasing the annual budget by the needed sums - at least. It might also be worth thinking about standardizing the existing new syllabi of Kabul faculties for all those sister-faculties in the provinces who have not yet revised their curricula in order to prevent the use of old and out-dated resources." The new government is supposed to bring a thorough structural change in educational system and university conditions. If the same trend continues, the universities will be no more than a machine which produces students with low quality. In short, the government has to focus more on quality rather than quantity and employ the expert and young resources of the society.

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