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**Let's Stand for Freedom of Expression**

Among fears that certain achievements in Afghanistan may be reversed after a deal with Taliban, the fear that some improvements regarding freedom of speech in the country may be lost is the most dominant one. Since the installation of a setup based on so-called democracy after the downfall of Taliban, there has been some encouragement to media, intellectuals, analysts, politicians and individuals to express themselves freely. However, a great deal of work still needs to be done to make freedom of speech flourish in the country in true sense.

In the last few years or so, the deteriorating security situation has influenced Afghan media to a large extent. In some cases, they have been directly attacked by Taliban and Daesh insurgents. Many journalists have lost their lives; Afghanistan is among top three worst countries for journalists. Many journalists were compelled to leave the country and find refuge in other countries. The measures taken by government, in the face of all these challenges, seem to be negligible. The result is that there has not been as much development as was possible. Securing and promoting media and, in particular, freedom of speech is vital and Afghanistan must continue efforts in the same regarding as it will ultimately promote democratic culture within Afghan society and would ensure smoother transition towards a better democratic system; and also because it is the right of every individual to have freedom of speech. Universal Declaration of Human Rights says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

It is said that the greatest virtue of human is wisdom and the greatest act of wisdom is to share knowledge through expression. Expression or speech, in its passive form, is a thought, while in its active form it is a voice. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to recognize the being of a human without his voice in the infinite expanse of the universe. Our reach is to the extent where our voice can echo and without our voice we would disappear in the darkness of silence. So, it is important that we talk as long as we live. The ones who do not have the opportunity to talk they feel that the unspoken words spread throughout their bodies like poison and snatch their happiness.

Therefore, everyone must be given a chance to speak their minds and let the words flow through their tongues and reach others, so that they can listen to them and analyze them; in this way the speaker would not feel that his words were not given the due respect. A very limited reservoir of knowledge has reached to us and if a major part of it remains untold and is victimized by silence, we would have a major loss - a loss that would be very difficult to compensate for. Here it is important to note that there are certain people, who, when talk, try to create conflicts and differences; however, it should not be forgotten that if such people remain silent, they would create even more divergences.

It is really important that human beings must keep the doors and windows of their inner selves open and let their expressions free like the winds in the deserts and the water flowing in the rivers. Indeed, the ones who speak are the real teachers and while those who are silent basically hide what they have. Therefore, it is necessary that the tradition and culture of speaking must be followed and pursued so as to spread what people know and let the listener judge as per his perceptions. In our society, for many years there have been certain limitations which are imposed on the people and which hamper free thinking and free expression; however, the people have not dared to stand against such limitations though these limitations influence them the most. Moreover, it can be observed that among some of the ruling elite, there is a sort of reservation regarding freedom of expression and they try to practice it in some way or the other. They try to impose limitations on freedom of expression through certain ways - they strive to generate social pressure and they even design laws to acquire their objective. This clearly shows that they are afraid of the realities and they are not confident enough to face them. However, the people have to understand that only a limited number of people have their self-centered incentives behind such controlled silence; therefore, such efforts should never be supported and people must make efforts to shatter all such chains that strive to limit their thoughts and their speech.

**Afghan Government Should Remedy Short-Comings & 'Governance Deficit' to Make Itself a Body to Reckon With**

By: Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

Recent peace talks between the US and Taliban insurgents, and exhibition of stubbornness in Taliban insurgents' attitude toward Afghan Government by refusing to talk to Afghan Government have dwarfed Afghan Government position at both national and international levels. In fact, this phenomenon has been looked at as 'humiliating' and 'shameful' on the part of Afghan Government. Worse of all, international partners - including NATO member countries, the United States of America and regional countries, who are partners in development - of Afghanistan seem to have connived and contributed in a major way towards belittling Afghan Government before the world and in the face of an insurgency, which is all, albeit denials but designed, supported and nurtured by Pakistan. For the last forty years, Afghanistan and Pakistan have been interlinked to regional and international maneuvering.

In the face of this new strategy, Government of Afghanistan should hold its ground, continue with ongoing improvement in its ranks by honing skills and strategies of its security and defense institutions, engage the enemy in combat operations, regain lost ground to re-establish government and provide support, assistance, good governance and security to general population. It is now or never that Afghan Government should stand strong, be a force to reckon with and be known for being representative, inclusive and legitimate body to represent the Afghan State and people of Afghanistan in all international platforms.

Upendra Baghel, an expert on Afghanistan is of the opinion that 'international community, whom President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani has believed, let him down as little progress in last five years, which was not appreciated by the lead nation, the US'. He further said that 'Afghans needed more security, police and development practitioners, not researchers' and that 'creating highly qualified personnel without field experience were of little help'. He observes that Taliban are not highly academically qualified but know field crafts. On the other hand efforts and resources have been expended to create a large pool of personnel engaged in support services again without field experience, which creates confusion in administration and chain of command and inefficiency. They continue seeking more resources and money. Drawing experience in the administration in the South Asian region and other developing countries, he says the governance model of Afghanistan is costly, which may not suit to underdeveloped country. He narrates the example of Rwanda to draw some lessons learnt. There, circumstances and situations differ but still, totally new institutions were set up, including armed forces and police. The country got stabilized with much less amount of aid money, but in Afghanistan they played with much of the aid and development money without producing tangible and expected results. President's recent efforts to explore avenues to reduce the cost of peace efforts in Afghanistan is an appropriate step to infuse efficiency but these efforts are little bit delayed and could have been earlier as almost all SIGAR reports point

for such action.

These drawbacks inside Afghan Government institutions - especially security and defense institutions - have created vacuum/space, which was filled by Taliban supporters including super-active ISI agents and left no stone unturned to take advantage and advance insurgents' agenda and tout 'weak Afghan Government institutions' at major international platforms. This trend has continued and dragged on to an extent, which has culminated in recent shape where Afghan Government was completely ostracized and was left outside of major interlocutors in gatherings and meetings which would decide on the fate of a country and nation which the Afghan Government officially represent. Afghan Government tried to be part of negotiations but it was smartly dwarfed by Taliban in last month's peace negotiations. Recent unconfirmed reports show Taliban insurgents representative who had led their team in peace negotiations in Qatar, has said that they wanted to dissolve Afghan Army and Police institutions, and would re-establish these anew and if that is the case, then it seems Afghan view on its cherished institutions has not been represented in peace negotiations.

But the most important point, which Taliban insurgents failed to recognize and are wide of the mark, is the presence of Afghan Government as legitimate and bona fide representative of Afghan people and Afghan state. Afghan Government forces fighting Taliban insurgents on the ground and chase Taliban insurgent village after village and their bunkers are blasted every day since last one month when new leadership has taken charge at MoD and MoI. Most importantly, Afghan Government has brought in much improvement in the ranks and performances of its institutions - especially in defense and security arenas. At this point in time in history, no group or organization can replace Afghan Government to protect Afghanistan from sliding back into anarchy and lawlessness as in 1990s. Afghan Government defense and security expenditure stands at \$5 billions a year, and an additional \$6 billion for development projects and government administration, which makes a total of \$11 billions a year. This amount is much less and affordable for Afghan friendly countries and regional countries to pay for keeping the present set up and protecting the legacy of last seventeen years progress and development in the country. It will be more costly for regional countries and international partners in the event Afghan Government is sidelined fully and the whole nation and the country is let to slide into unknown destination - which if it is allowed to happen - can engulf the whole region and the world into an insecure place. Therefore, it is in the interest of the people and State of Afghanistan, regional countries and international community - including Taliban insurgents - to support and include Afghan Government in the process of ongoing peace negotiation so that a desirable consensual outcome can be reached and lasting peace be established in Afghanistan.

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**Global Health Versus Online Trolls**

By: Junaid Nabi

The most frustrating part of my job as a public health scientist is the spread of false information - usually online - that overrides years of empirical research. It is difficult enough for doctors to counter medical falsehoods in face-to-face conversations with patients. It becomes even harder to do so when such fakery is transmitted via the Internet.

I recently witnessed this pattern first hand in Kashmir, where I was raised. There, parents of young children trusted videos and messages on Facebook, YouTube, or WhatsApp that spread false rumors that modern medications and vaccines were harmful, or even that they were funded by foreigners with ulterior motives. Discussions with local colleagues in pediatrics revealed how a single video or instant message with false information was enough to dissuade parents from believing in medical therapies.

Physicians in other parts of India and Pakistan have reported numerous cases in which parents, many of them well educated, refuse polio vaccinations for their children. Reports that the CIA once organized a fake vaccination drive to spy on militants in Pakistan have added to mistrust in the region. Given the high stakes involved, states sometimes resort to extreme measures, such as arresting uncooperative parents, to ensure that vulnerable communities are vaccinated.

This is just one regional example of the global threat that online misinformation poses to public health. In the United States, a recent study in the American Journal of Public Health reported how Twitter bots and Russian trolls have skewed the public debate on vaccine effectiveness. Having examined 1.8 million tweets over a three-year period from 2014 to 2017, the study concluded that the purpose of these automated accounts was to create enough anti-vaccine content online to develop a false equivalence in the vaccination debate.

Such misinformation programs succeed for a reason. In March 2018, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reported that false stories on Twitter spread significantly faster than true ones. Their analysis revealed how the human need for novelty, and the information's ability to evoke an emotional response, are vital in spreading false stories.

The Internet amplifies the damage caused by these "alternative facts," because it can disseminate them at massive scale and speed - a few fake or troll accounts are enough to spread misinformation to millions. And once it spreads, it is virtually impossible to retract. The role of Twitter bots and trolls in the 2016 US elections and the United Kingdom's Brexit vote is clear. Now they have affect-

ed global health as well. If we don't take robust and coordinated steps to address this alarming trend, we may lose out on a century's worth of successes in health communication and vaccination, both of which depend on public trust.

We can take several steps to start reversing the damage. For starters, health officials and experts in both developed and developing countries need to understand how this online misinformation is eroding public trust in health programs. They also need to engage actively with global social media giants such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google, as well as major regional players including WeChat and Viber. This means working in tandem to create guidelines and protocols for how information of public interest can be disseminated safely.

In addition, social media companies can work with scientists to identify patterns and behaviors of spam accounts that try to disseminate false information on important public-health issues. Twitter, for example, has already started using machine-learning technology to limit activity from spam accounts, bots, and trolls.

More rigorous verification of accounts, from the moment of signing up, will also be a powerful deterrent to the further expansion of automated accounts. Two-factor authentication, using an email address or phone number when signing up, is a prudent start. CAPTCHA technology requiring users to identify images of cars or street signs - something humans can do better than machines (for now, at least) - can also limit automated sign-ups and bot activity.

These precautions are unlikely to infringe upon any individual's right to voice an opinion. Public health officials must err on the side of caution when weighing free-speech rights against outright falsehoods that endanger public welfare. Abusing the anonymity provided by the Internet, spam accounts, bots, and trolls serve to disrupt and pollute available information and confuse people. Taking prudent action to avert situations where lives are at stake is a moral imperative.

Global public health took huge strides forward during the twentieth century. Further progress in the twenty-first will come not only through ground-breaking research and community work, but also through online engagement. The next battle for global health may be fought on the Internet. And by acting quickly enough to defeat the trolls, we can prevent avoidable illnesses and deaths around the world.

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