

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



February 03, 2016

Taliban Continue Aggression

Terror continues in Kabul and once again the doubts and ambiguities are rising regarding the peace and tranquility in the country. It is important to note that currently Afghan government is striving for a peace deal with Taliban and the preparatory talks have already taken place. Rise in insecurity being claimed by Taliban at this juncture would either mean that Taliban are not at all interested in peace deal with Afghan government or they are pressuring it so that it can have more leverage in the peace talks and may even set their own conditions.

In the last few weeks, Taliban have carried out some very heinous attacks in the capital Kabul that have resulted in the death of both the civilians and the security forces. Few days earlier they carried out the tragic attack on the employees of Tolo TV that was one of the most cowardly attacks by Taliban. Guiltless civilians (including women), who were doing nothing except earning livelihood for their family members, were brutally killed and after that the attack was shamelessly claimed by Taliban. The attack gave rise to many questions and concerns regarding the security of media employees and received condemnation from all circles of the society to a great extent. It further spoiled the reputation of Taliban and widened the gap between them and the common masses. It clearly showed what sort of Shariah law they want and what they basically consider as a threat to an "Islamic Emirate".

That attack basically showed the mindset of Taliban and it is very likely that they enter the peace talks with the same mindset and may even stick to it. The challenge is for the Afghan government to deal with such a mindset. And, the question is if they stick to the same mindset, will Afghan government show some flexibility and promise to them some of the amendments which they want in government policies and even Afghan constitution? If not, what are the other options for Afghan government? Will Afghan government also continue aggression? Afghan government needs to come up with a clear strategy regarding the peace talks with Taliban. Using soft language and inviting them with open arms for talks alone would not solve the issue. Afghan government has to speak from a stronger position and let Taliban know that there would not be any compromise regarding peace and stability in the country.

Taliban have clearly shown that they are not going to leave their aggression easily, as they have continued their deadly attacks. In a deadly attack on Monday, a Taliban suicide bomber attacked Public Order and Border Forces base in Dehmazang area of Kabul city that killed 20 people and injured 29 others.

The reports reveal that there were civilians among both the dead and the injured. According to the Ministry of Interior (MoI), the suicide bomber wanted to enter the base but when the security guards at the gate became suspicious the bomber detonated his suicide vest.

The attack received condemnation from Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani and CEO, Abdullah Abdullah, as it once again gave little consideration to the lives of the civilians. Resolute Support deputy chief of staff for communication, Brig. Gen. Wilson Shoffner, also condemned the attack and said, "Once again, terrorists have targeted a populated area with no regard for innocent lives... The Taliban have no plan for the development of Afghanistan. Targeting those who defend their fellow Afghans does not advance the cause of peace."

It really raises questions and doubts about Taliban's willingness for peace talks as they have continued their aggression. If they are really ready for the talks, they must first of all announce cease-fire. Pursuing peace talks without cease-fire would not be successful and may result in continued war.

It is important for Afghanistan that a cease-fire should be announced before Taliban start their Spring Offensive. It is not likely that before spring there can be conclusion of the peace talks but there can certainly be a cease-fire. Taliban require understanding that they cannot pursue peace talks along with aggression. Their aggression may further result in a response by Afghan forces and the war may continue indefinitely, which will not be in anyone's favor.

People of Afghanistan also want to see an end to insecurity and instability and they also deserve so as well as they give sacrifices every day. They are tired of decades of war and they do not want that this opportunity for peace should be wasted. Therefore, the Afghan government, the neighboring countries and international community must also pressurize Taliban to come to terms with the basic condition of a negotiation, which is nothing except a cease-fire. Now, it is evident for everyone what Taliban are up to and what they have been doing in Afghanistan. They may have shown changed image in the current meetings that they had attended in different countries, but to the people of Afghanistan they have shown violence and terror. So, for the greater good of Afghan people strict stance should be taken against them.

The Prospect of Upcoming War Season

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

With the winter season inching to its end, there are growing concerns over the Taliban's upcoming offensive and the prospect of security in the country. The latest alarm came from Gen. John Campbell, the commander of the US-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. Campbell has said that there would be a bloody year ahead if Afghanistan and Pakistan fail to do something concrete for peace within next two months. This is while the Afghan government rejected an assessment carried out by the US monitoring body for reconstruction of Afghanistan, SIGAR, that since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the group is more powerful than any time before. According to the assessment, the Taliban controls more areas than in the past while the government of Afghanistan currently maintains control over about 70 percent of the country. The Afghan government has acknowledged the intensification of the Taliban insurgency but has rejected that the group has extended areas under its control.

Despite the expected lull in the winter season, the Taliban have been trying to escalate their attacks on the capital Kabul and elsewhere across the country. The group has organized a number of bombings and suicide attacks in the city of Kabul and other provinces. The Monday attack on police headquarter in western Kabul left at least nine dead and many others injured. The recent Taliban attacks suggest the group's efforts to keep the momentum of their violence until it is time for another seasonal offensive against government forces. The government is also expecting a bloody Taliban offensive next year. As the upcoming Taliban offensive seems to be around the corner, the Afghan government has stepped up efforts for military preparations to confront the upcoming Taliban offensive. According to the officials, during the winter season, the government has been launching military operations across the country to suppress the Taliban and disrupt the group's preparations for the militants' upcoming offensive. Recently, Afghan defense officials assured the public over the readiness of the armed forces for tackling the Taliban's next year offensive. The officials expressed optimism for having the upper hand in the upcoming battle against the Taliban as the Afghan air force has been equipped with a number of new warplanes. The last year battle against the Taliban proved highly challenging for Afghanistan's national security forces as they had shouldered the burden of the war alone after the US-led NATO forces ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. The Taliban managed to wage bloodiest offensives against government forces across the country particularly in the north. The group had some notable military gains on the ground in the northern and eastern parts of the country while the militant groups extended their influence in insecure areas of Ghazni, Zabul and Helmand provinces. The momentary seizure of the Kunduz province by Taliban was the most spectacular victory for the group since 2001. The group managed to extend insurgency in areas that were relatively secure before 2014. The Afghan army

and police forces were overwhelmed by the intensity and extent of the militant attacks across the country.

The Taliban would try to further intensify their military offensives against the Afghan government to build up their gains of their previous year's insurgency. Taliban's war tactics have profoundly changed compared to the group's sporadic bombings, suicide attacks and group attacks before 2014. The Taliban now tend to organize more sophisticated and coordinated attacks than in the past. The Taliban has become able to wage more organized and conventional war against the Afghan army and police forces. The group has gained the ability to mount attacks that are larger in scale and fiercer in intensity. While in winter season, the group is keeping the pressure on by bombings and suicide attacks on public and government installations. The militant groups' approach has shifted towards launching more robust and organized offensives against government forces along with sustained bomb and suicide attacks. However, the government expects that better equipment of the Afghan security and defense forces would reverse the trend in favor of the government forces in the coming years. The Afghan officials say that Afghan air force is now ready to provide air support to the ground units fighting in the battlefields. The officials assert that the Taliban has no chance of sustaining against the Afghan army offensive and the aerial support of its air force.

The Taliban's winter-season attacks on Kabul and elsewhere across the country could also be aimed at having the upper hand in the fighting before any peace talks starts. Afghanistan and Pakistan have speeded up efforts through the four-way initiative to bring the Taliban leaders to the table of negotiations. The Afghan government expects that peace talks would result in a ceasefire or a decrease in violence in the country. However, it is very unlikely that the Taliban stops the ongoing violence as they negotiate peace with the government. The Afghan government needs to stay realistic and extend military pressures against the militant groups to force the militants into a negotiated ceasefire.

The upcoming year will be a critical year for the Afghan national security forces. Despite the heightened efforts by Afghan and Pakistani governments for resumption of peace talks with the Taliban, it is highly unlikely to expect a ceasefire and decrease of violence in a near future. Therefore, the Afghan security forces need to brace for another year of fierce fighting across the country. Afghan security agencies need to be able to take the right strategy against the Taliban's shifting war tactics.

As witnessed in the previous year, the Taliban will continue to wage more organized war, and in the meantime, will open many fronts across the country to stretch the capacity and resources of the Afghan security forces.

The ANSF, on one hand, will need to be able to mobilize quickly in event of Taliban opening new fronts in the war, and on the other hand, will need to sufficiently and timely reinforce the units engaged in the battles against the Taliban.

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

The Elephant in the Boardroom

By Lucy P. Marcus

Business and government leaders worry about a multitude of issues these days. Climate change, weapons of mass destruction, water scarcity, migration, and energy are the greatest threats we face, according to the 750 experts surveyed for the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report 2016. And at the WEF's annual meeting in Davos this year, the sheer number of unsettled issues - the Middle East meltdown, the European Union's future (particularly given the possibility of a British exit), America's presidential election, the refugee crisis, China's economic slowdown, oil prices, and more - was itself unsettling.

But consider this: None of the risks highlighted in the WEF report caused the recent spike in debt crises or the wave of scandals that engulfed - just in the last year - Volkswagen, Toshiba, Valeant, and FIFA. These developments (and many more) are rooted in a more pedestrian - and perennial - problem: the inability or refusal to recognize the need for course correction (including new management).

As anti-establishment parties and candidates gain ground with voters throughout Europe and in the United States, political leaders who continue to pursue a business-as-usual approach could find themselves looking for new jobs. And the same is true of business leaders: Activist investors are fed up and determined to force change, either with a hands-on approach or by voting with their feet and divesting from companies that don't meet their criteria.

As Barbara Novick, a vice chair of BlackRock, noted on a panel on corporate governance and ethics at this year's Davos gathering, her firm looks carefully at whether the boards of companies in which BlackRock invests include people who are engaged and asking hard questions consistently throughout the year. And yet the heads of some of the world's largest companies still seem to be in denial. I spent several hours last year with the chief executive and chair of a bank who thought it unfair that investors were planning to vote against him holding both posts. Though he agreed that having one person in both roles is, in principle, a bad idea, he insisted that he was the exception. I had a similar conversation this year with someone who noted that most of his company's board had served for upwards of 20 years, and that his company had just established an age limit of 80 for board members. More rapid turnover might work for other companies, he conceded; but, again, his company was

somehow exceptional.

On the other hand, Hiroaki Nakanishi, CEO and Chairman of Hitachi, spoke eloquently to me about the importance of corporate governance and the changing demands that global companies faced. He noted the importance of having non-Japanese board members as Hitachi seeks to expand further internationally.

The problem is that those now speaking up for long-term investing, commitment to the community, and building companies that last are doing so over dinner, behind closed doors, or under the protection of the Chatham House Rule (which requires that reported statements remain unattributed to those who made them). Indeed, in the program for this year's Davos meeting, the phrase "corporate governance" appeared just once (for the panel with Novick that I was on). The same was true for "board" and "boardroom," while a search for "ethics" turned up sessions on medicine and biotech. "Governance" was primarily about political governance, and "stewardship" referred to the planet.

Many people are cynical about Davos - and they aren't completely wrong. Years ago, it was because the meetings were so openly secretive (much like the way people perceive board meetings). Nowadays, the WEF webcasts many of its sessions, and the cynicism comes from the sense that what is being discussed is not what business and government leaders need to think about.

That's not the WEF's fault. Davos has extraordinary convening power and the ability to bring important issues to the fore, including LGBT issues this year. There is no reason it cannot also include issues like the pay gap between executives and labor, the impact of corporate decisions on communities and the environment, and the growing loss of trust toward business and government. What it can't do is force CEOs, board directors, investors, and policymakers to speak about such issues openly and on the record.

It is easy for companies to see far-off risks that they cannot control. It is a lot harder, but a lot more important, for them to acknowledge the risks stemming from how they operate. And it is harder still to persuade those business leaders who do comprehend such risks to talk about them on a public stage. That reluctance to speak openly about how to restructure corporate governance in a way that improves stewardship places all of us at risk.

Lucy P. Marcus is CEO of Marcus Venture Consulting.



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

Vice-Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

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