

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



February 07, 2017

Cold Weather and Insecurity Haunt Afghanistan

It is really unfortunate to see that Afghanistan has been suffering from both the wrath of cold weather and increasing insecurity. And, mostly civilians and poor people of Afghanistan have been undergoing these sufferings. As they are not properly equipped to fight against the wrath of the cold weather and the security circumstances are also not pleasant for them, they are seriously influenced by them and unfortunately the measures that are being taken by the responsible authorities are not timely and sufficient. Moreover, the Taliban insurgents take advantage of all these conditions to further suppress the poor masses.

The current snowfall in different parts of the country has victimized several people. According to certain news reports hundreds of people have died in the past few days in avalanches and heavy snowstorms in different parts of the country, mostly central and northern parts. Government officials have also confirmed that over 80 people have been injured in weather related incidents and about 22 provinces have been effected.

According to a statement by UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Kabul, "At least 50 people were reported as killed, with a further 13 injured from an avalanche in Nuristan which occurred in the early hours of February 05 (Sunday). Further casualties from other avalanches and heavy snowfall were also reported in other areas around Afghanistan, including a reported 10 killed and 12 injured in Darwaz Bala, Badakhshan province."

As Afghanistan is suffering from limited resources and unpreparedness people seem to suffer more than expected when they face any natural disaster. The current snowfall and avalanches in certain parts of the country have taken many lives that could be saved. As, there is no effective mechanism to respond to the emergencies in most of the remote areas of the country, the disasters have proved to be gigantic and the poor people have suffered misery and agony.

Almost every year severe cold weather victimizes many poor people as they do not have enough capacity to secure themselves. As the people in the affected areas, because of their wretched and torn shelters and no fuel or wood to burn, are victimized, there is no support from the relevant officials to provide them the facilities to fight against the death. The result is misery. And when the severe cold weather turn into disasters in the form of avalanches in some parts of country, the incapacity of the government to help its people out of the disaster is exposed to a large extent. There are many lives that can be saved through proper and timely efforts. Moreover, there are many other areas as well that are necessary to be given proper attention by the government so that such disasters and incidents should be properly handled.

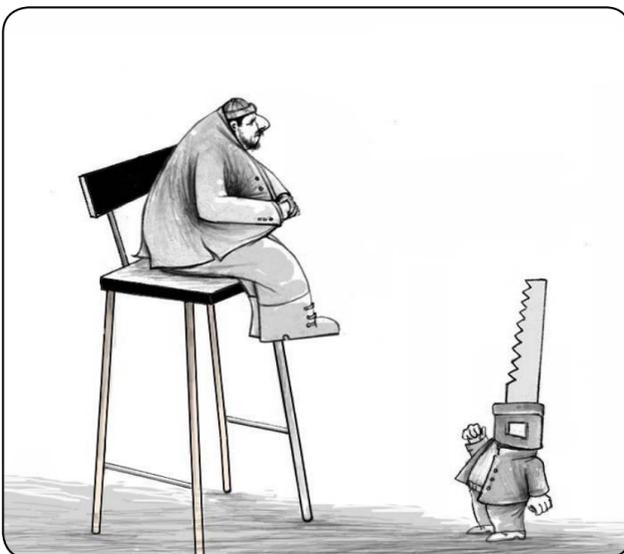
Among them making a very well-equipped and properly trained disaster management unit is the most important one. At the same time making the different parts of country accessible through proper roads is also an important one. Many places happen to be in the remotest of the areas, where the rescue teams and equipment take a very lengthy time to reach as there are no proper roads.

Coupled with the ongoing wrath of the cold weather is the increasing insecurity. A UN report issued on Monday, February 6, recorded the highest ever number of civilian casualties in a single year, including record figures for children killed and injured in 2016. The report documents 11,418 conflict-related civilian casualties, including 3,498 killed and 7,920 injured. Of these, 3,512 were children - 923 dead and 2,589 injured, up 24 percent on the previous highest recorded figure.

The figures, recorded by UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), are the highest since the UN began systematically documenting civilian casualty figures in 2009.

The report notes that in the reported year, ground engagements between Anti-Government Elements and Pro-Government Forces, particularly in areas populated or frequented by civilians, remained the leading cause of civilian casualties, followed by improvised explosive devices (IED), suicide and complex attacks, as well as targeted and deliberate killings. The report also documents the increase in attacks perpetrated by Daesh, particularly targeting Shia Muslims.

This is really tragic and shows how the life is getting difficult for the civilians in the country. After the downfall of Taliban and particularly after the withdrawal of international troops, there were hopes that Afghanistan would move towards a self-reliant country with a democratic government that would represent all the people of Afghanistan and would ultimately work for its development and particularly to ensure security and strengthen peace-building initiatives; however, that never happened. All those hopes remained only dreams and the realities have started haunting the poor people. It has always been the poor people who have suffered the agony and the troubles and the situation will remain the same unless there are efforts to change the overall mentality of the governing authorities and, at the same time, prevailing government structure that has failed to deliver anything worthwhile.



Removing HIA from UN blacklist after Kabul-peace Deal

By Muhammad Zahir Akbari

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has removed sanctions against Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of a militant group, some five months after the government inked a landmark peace agreement. In the meantime, the Afghan government welcomed the decision, saying that it was a historic day for the peace process in country. In a joint press conference held in Kabul on Saturday afternoon, representatives of both sides praised the achievement. Mohammad Akram Khyalwak, a political advisor to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, described the move as "a major step toward peace and stability in Afghanistan." He also called all other militant groups to join the peace process. Hezb-i-Islami's chief peace negotiator, Amin Karim, for his part, said both sides were currently working on fulfilling all commitments stated in the peace agreement and that both sides were satisfied with the progress up to the date.

Thus it is informed of government preparations to welcome HIA leader in Kabul and work is going over the fate of HIA prisoners by the Attorney General Office. Pointing out to the success of peace deal between government and HIA, the NUG frequently emphasized to all armed groups, including Taliban insurgent to shun violence and join peace and reconciliation process. Mohammad Karim Amin, Head of HIA Delegation said, "Removal of HIA leader's name from UN-black list is a positive step toward peace in Afghanistan." He said that based on peace agreement, removal of HIA leaders from UN-black list was a need. He ensured people that HIA would exert utmost efforts to maintain peace all over the country. "Removal of HIA leader is a clear sign of UN support for Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process," he noted.

The peace agreement was finalized after nearly two years of formal and non-formal negotiations. Eventually, In September of last year, Hekmatyar signed a peace agreement with Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, which was brokered by Afghan High Peace Council after two years of negotiations, via a video conference broadcast by the state-run TV. As part of peace deal, the Afghan government requested the UN Security Council to remove HIA from black list. Though, he lived in unknown place for a long time but expected to visit Kabul soon; the government will have to provide security for him and his followers and release imprisoned members of the group under the peace deal.

The global body's decision came after Afghan government requested that the warlord's name needs to be removed from the blacklist. It was the first agreement signed between government and an insurgent group which potentially paving the way for him to openly return to the country. Under the deal, the Afghan government promised to offer

an official pardon to the associates of the militant group. But the group would be barred from joining the government although it would be recognized as a political party involved in major political decisions. However, several foreign governments praised the accord at that time seeing it as a step forward to wider peace in the country. The Afghan government and the international partners hope the deal may serve to encourage a similar agreement with the Taliban which has been gaining ground since the withdrawal of most international forces by the end of 2014.

On the other hand, it raised the concerns that the agreement would cultivate the culture of impunity and likewise HIA's ideologies will restrict the role of women in political and social arenas to a large extent and marginalize them from the government. Many emphasized, if the peace deal is signed at the cost of people's rights, legal values and freedom, this will not be acceptable for those who sacrificed to achieving current state. It is the government to be vigilant enough so that the negotiation does not be counterproductive or create a gap between state and nation since it seems to put the government on a collision course with the public. The public concerns back to 1990s, as he played a major role during the bloody civil war; He became known as the infamous warlord of Kabul for his faction's indiscriminate firing of rockets into the capital. Being responsible for many deaths, human rights abuses and destruction led many Afghans to welcome the takeover of the Taliban. He also fought against the troops of former Soviet Union in the 1980s. In 2003, Hekmatyar was designated by the United States as a "global terrorist" and since then his whereabouts are unknown. However, after the peace deal, the Afghan government demanded the UN Security Council to remove name of Hekmatyar from its sanctions list. Removing him from the list of designated terrorists means he would no longer have his assets frozen by the UN, or be subjected to a travel ban or an arms embargo.

Overall, the agreement grants amnesty for Hekmatyar in exchange for support of the Afghan Constitution and a promise to disband the military wing of the organization. As playing a small role in the current insurgent conflict in Afghanistan and lost its public support, it is the best opportunity for HIA to compensate the past as well as open a new footpath among people by releasing hundreds of prisoners. Alternatively, as past five months showed, it is not likely to bring significant changes in the fortunes of Afghanistan. The HIA chief was the least of the several factors threatening social and economical development in Afghanistan. The main factors such as Taliban, Daesh, Haqqani group and etc remained determined to blackmailing the country.

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Greening Digital Finance

By Simon Zadek

Digital finance has turned out to be an unexpected revolutionary, simply by enabling low-cost financial inclusion. Thanks to new financial technologies (fintech), consumers can shop seamlessly, migrants can send hard-earned money to their families cheaply, small businesses can access credit in minutes through Big Data-driven profiling, and savers can shape their own investment destinies. But if fintech is to reach its potential to advance the global public good, another factor must be accounted for: the environment.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) recently published a report, "Fintech and Sustainable Development: Assessing the Implications," exploring how digital finance can be leveraged for environmental gains. As the report points out, by reducing costs and boosting efficiency, fintech is already mobilizing green finance, enabling poorer people to access clean energy through innovative payment systems and facilitating green savings for rich and poor alike.

The Swedish start-up Trine, for example, enables savers in downtown Stockholm to fund distributed solar-energy systems in rural areas thousands of kilometers away. Kenya's M-KOPA is leveraging the hugely successful domestic mobile payments platform, M-PESA, to make clean energy available to poorer communities.

Other experiments highlight the green potential of blockchain and cryptocurrencies.

The rewards of such initiatives could be substantial – for households, financial-services providers, economies, and the environment. With this in mind, a coalition of digital-finance companies, the Green Digital Finance Alliance, was launched at this year's World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos, Switzerland.

One of the alliance's founders, ANT Financial Services, has a mobile-payments platform with 450 million users in China alone. The organization is now working with UNEP to offer an experimental "green energy" app that rewards users for reduced carbon use.

Fintech is part of a broader digital revolution, which also includes Big Data, the Internet of Things, blockchain, and artificial intelligence. Such technologies enable us to record and trace the lifecycle of products – even money itself – thereby determining precisely how they were used, how they were financed, and what impact they had on the environment. So ANT's new green energy app translates financial-transaction data into implied carbon emissions. This approach, if extended across more payments platforms,

could engage hundreds of millions of individuals in factoring carbon-savings into their daily lifestyle choices.

All revolutions carry unintended costs, and are susceptible to diversion, if not outright corruption. The fintech revolution is no different. Loss of privacy is the most obvious risk; indeed, despite efforts to create safeguards, it is all but inevitable. But there are also less visible risks, stemming from the disruption of existing markets. As the journalist and author Michael Lewis emphasized in his bestseller Flash Boys, the risks created by high-frequency trading on the financial returns of our lumbering, twentieth-century pension funds are far-reaching.

Another casualty will be regulation, at least for a while, as policymakers struggle to figure out how to manage an increasingly complex, dynamic, and virtual financial system. There is also a risk that the commoditization effects brought by speed and Big Data will undermine the conditions for sustainable development.

Though these risks cannot be eliminated, they can be mitigated. Regulators, in particular, will need to work fast to keep up, as best they can, in a fast-changing financial milieu. But their goal should not be only to protect against fintech's risks; they should also aim to guide it, so that it can reach its full potential. For example, fintech should be aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals – an effort that demands new standards, market innovation, and collaboration.

Countries worldwide should integrate digital finance into their sustainable-development financing plans. Coalitions like the Green Digital Finance Alliance can support these efforts, by mobilizing collective action on the part of financial institutions and their stakeholders.

Multilateral measures will also be important. This year, the G20, under Germany's leadership, will focus on building resilience, improving sustainability, and assuming responsibility for climate change – all areas where digitization must be part of the solution. Likewise, the G7, under Italy's leadership, will explore how to finance "green" small and medium-size enterprises, taking advantage of fintech-powered innovations.

With the right approach, fintech can be harnessed to strengthen economies and societies, while helping to preserve the environment. Fortunately, this could well be the year that green digital finance comes of age. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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