

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



February 11, 2016

US Support for Afghanistan Continues

As the international troops have been withdrawing from the country, it would be a challenging task for Afghanistan to stand on its own and face the challenges. It would, definitely, require the support of the regional and international partners in its journey to self-sustainability. US has been the largest supporter for Afghanistan and it would continue to do so in the times to come. US support would be crucial for the peace-building and development purposes for Afghanistan, and US seems committed to support the country in the post-withdrawal era.

A couple of days earlier Obama administration proposed USD 2.5 billion in financial assistance to Afghanistan. US Secretary of State, John Kerry said the aid would reinforce the country's security and development. He also added that the proposed assistance would help the Afghan government tackle corruption, counter the influence of extremists and terrorists, strengthen civil society and promote health, education, economic growth and good governance.

As US President Barack Obama sent his last annual budget to the Congress, he reaffirmed America's long term commitment to Afghanistan and said that the budget continues to support long-term national security and economic interests in Afghanistan and helps sustain political, economic, and security gains in the country as the US draws down its forces and assistance levels gradually decline.

The State Department said the 2017 Overseas Contingency Operation (OCO) of \$672.1 million request continued transitioning to a more self-sustaining diplomatic mission, focused on diplomatic engagement, public outreach, and empowering the Government of Afghanistan in its ongoing efforts toward self-sustainment. Maintaining the development gains made over the last 13 years in health, education, and gender remained a priority, it said, pledging to partner with Afghanistan in its ongoing efforts to bolster economic growth, strengthen the rule of law and fight corruption.

Proposing \$1.027 billion for Afghanistan under OCO's Economic Support Fund, the State Department said this prioritized areas critical to sustaining gains of the last decade and objectives of the government while continuing to lay the foundation for sustained economic, political, and social sector development.

Civilian assistance programmes would focus increasingly on long-term development and the critical task of making Afghanistan more self-reliant and sustainable, it said.

This proposed assistance seems promising; however, real efforts should be made so that this assistance is able to be utilized for its true purpose. So far, Afghanistan has received a great deal of support and assistance from US and other countries but all of that has never been used for the restoration of peace and development purposes. Corruption, however, has been dominant in devouring most of that assistance, while the common people still face poverty, unemployment and insecurity. Mostly, the support and assistance that were meant for changing the lives of the people of Afghanistan could only change the financial position of certain authorities in the country, while the poor people have kept on being miserable. Therefore, real, dedicated and honest efforts should be made both by the US and Afghan authorities to make the assistance reach to the common people of Afghanistan and change their lives.

As far as security is concerned, it would definitely be a challenge and the assistance should be directed towards enabling and equipping the Afghan forces in such a way that they are able to defend the country on their own. Strengthening Afghan Air Force and training and equipping the Special Forces would be vital. Moreover, making sure that there is enough budget for the salaries of Afghan security forces is also very important. Training and development would be vital but at the same time it is necessary to understand that the spring season is approaching, which would mean a surge in Taliban's offensive; therefore, direct supervision of Afghan forces is imperative so that it can get through the season triumphant.

The efforts regarding the peace talks with Taliban must also be multiplied so that there is a permanent solution to the war against them. The assistance in this regard must be focused on pressurizing different stakeholders to come to the negotiation table and must pursue the attitude of peace and tranquility. Currently, the efforts of peace negotiation with Taliban facilitated by Pakistan and monitored by US and China is a great opportunity and must be pursued with full support and assistance.

On the development side, the list for Afghanistan is very long. There are myriads of economic and social problems that the country is going through. However, any assistance in this regard must be directed towards good governance. Handling corruption must be on the top of the list. Then there should be efforts to deal with two basic problems; poverty and unemployment. As long as these issues persist, the opportunities are limited to work on the other issues and solve them successfully.

There is no doubt in the fact that Afghanistan requires the support of the US; however, it is important that this support should be directed towards the right targets and must be pursued with true intentions and honesty.

The Vacuum of Democracy

By Hujjatullah Zia

People living in a democratic society must serve as the ultimate guardians of their own freedom and must forge their own path toward the ideals which are also set forth in the preamble to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world."

Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule and individual rights. Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that all levels of government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.

Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in political, economic and cultural life of society.

The freedom of belief and thought is a social need. It implies that man should be free in these vital aspects of his life and that there should be no obstacle in the way of his advancement and sojourns and no hurdle to the development of his capacities. One of the most venerable capacities in man, which he needs most intensely in order to develop freely, is his capacity for thought and belief.

The discourse of human rights is a highly debated issue in a democratic government. Human rights are commonly understood as inalienable fundamental rights "to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being," and which are "inherent in all human beings" regardless of their nation, location, language, religion, ethnic origin or any other status. They are applicable everywhere and at every time in the sense of being universal and they are egalitarian in the sense of being the same for everyone. They require empathy and the rule of law and impose an obligation on persons to respect the human rights of others. They should not be taken away except as a result of due process based on specific circumstances, and require freedom from unlawful imprisonment, torture, and execution. A number of standard individual rights are especially important to ethnic and religious minorities, including rights to freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and freedom from discrimination. Human rights documents also include rights that refer to minorities explicitly and give them special protections. For example, the Civil and Political Covenant in Article 27 says that persons belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities "shall

not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language." It should be noted that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is based on moral values, adopted to preclude from violence, oppression and barbarity which had outraged the human conscience, and to ensure freedom, peace and justice around the globe. The modern human rights' discourse aims to recognize human's rights and dignity which root in moral values and religious concepts. The objective of the UDHR is stated in its preamble, "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people..."

Anyhow, it is worth mentioning that majority rule, by itself, is not automatically democratic. For example, no one would call a system fair or just that permitted 51% of the population to oppress the remaining 49% in the name of the majority. In a democratic society, majority rule must be coupled with guarantees of individual human rights that, in turn, serve to protect the rights of minorities and dissenters - whether ethnic, religious, or simply the losers in political debate. The rights of minorities do not depend upon the good will of the majority and cannot be eliminated by majority vote. In other words, the rights of minorities are protected because democratic laws and institutions protect the rights of all citizens.

It is aptly said that "form of government is called a democracy because its administration is in the hands, not of a few, but of the whole people. In the settling of private disputes, everyone is equal before the law.... And we pay special regard to those laws that are for the protection of the oppressed and to all the unwritten laws that we know bring disgrace upon the transgressor when they are broken."

However, the immature democracy in Afghanistan is full of difficulties and cannot be a panacea for the bleeding wounds of the nation. The basic rights of the public are violated and their blood is spilled on the street by the armed insurgents right under the nose of the government. In short, people's ballots could not stop the bullets and their freedoms are curtailed and their rights and dignity are trampled upon on a large scale.

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The Battle for Helmand

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

With the bitter battle going on between Taliban fighters and government forces in the southern Helmand province, the Resolute Support Mission is sending hundreds of additional American troops to the province to help Afghan forces fighting the Taliban. In recent months, Helmand province witnessed fierce fighting between Afghan government forces and the insurgents trying to capture key districts from the Afghan army. The embattled government forces are reportedly under immense pressures from a rare winter-time heavy Taliban offensive from many fronts in the province. There have been fresh reports in recent weeks of Afghan security forces coming under fresh offensives from the Taliban.

The dispatch of additional US troops to the province is coming at a time when the Taliban are preparing for a heightened military campaign in the province. It is highly likely that the upcoming seasonal fighting in the province would be far bitter as the Taliban are going to focus on making gains on the battlegrounds in the province. The ongoing offensive of the Taliban has been somehow unexpected as usually we were witnessing some lulls in the previous winter seasons across the country. But Taliban's offensives this winter in Helmand and northern Baghlan provinces are signs that the group is preparing the ground for a more heightened war next spring and summer seasons.

The current contingent of American forces stationed in the province to assist and advise Afghan army and police forces has been under increased pressures due to the increased focus of the Taliban on the southern province. American troops stationed in the province under the Resolute Support Mission play a key role in advising and training Afghan security forces in fighting the Taliban and maintaining security in the volatile provinces. The deployment of the additional American forces will be crucially helpful for the Afghan army and police units fighting the Taliban in the province. The new contingent of American forces can help the Afghan forces engaged in the fighting better plan and prepare for a new and bitter summer fighting in the province.

The Afghan army and police forces in combat still remain reliant to the foreign troops' assistance in intelligence, coordination, planning, surveillance, logistic and aerial support. Lack of the mentioned key capabilities particularly proper coordination in the Afghan army and police ranks has been the main factor behind the setbacks experienced by Afghan security forces last year. The Afghan security forces' responses to the immense offensives of the Taliban last year were more reactive and arbitrary rather than through an efficient strategy to counter pop-up offensives of the militants throughout the country. The pattern of the Taliban offensives in the upcoming summer fighting would probably be the same as last year. In 2015,

the militants aimed to stretch Afghan forces on many fronts while fighting for specific military gains in few but strategically important areas. The Taliban launched offensives in some southern and eastern provinces, while they massed fighters in the north for taking key areas that could serve as safe havens for the militant groups. On the other hand, the Taliban's war strategy has significantly changed with the aim to portray a more powerful image for the insurgency. The Taliban now fight more conventional wars and mobilize more fighters to focus on key areas through large-scale offensives rather than low-profile bombings and suicide attacks.

The Afghan security forces need to counter Taliban's tactics. The next year summer fighting will be a major test for the Afghan security forces for their capabilities to adjust their response to the shifting military approaches of the Taliban. The army and police will need to mount heavier offensives over short periods of time in response to pop-up offensives of the Taliban. Only with quick and more powerful military response to the militants' offensives, the government forces can then focus on maintaining security for long. The Afghan security forces should not be trapped in the faulty approach of showing momentary but weak response to a Taliban offensive. The government needs to ensure that there are more than sufficient military preparations for the possible upcoming battle in the Southern key province. The government needs to further boost the Afghan air force to become able to provide aerial support on the battlefields. The national unity government is credited for convincing the international community in particularly the United States and India to provide warplanes for Afghanistan's fledgling air force. This is expected to make a noticeable difference for government forces. On the other hand, the Afghan government needs to persuade the US for more active military support to the Afghan security forces in the coming years.

The upcoming battle will be key for the government's efforts to start peace negotiations with the Taliban. The Taliban cannot be persuaded into peace talks without being militarily defeated. The militant groups will only realize their need to come to peace talks when they fail to make gains on the ground. A key objective of the Taliban in the heightened military offensives after conclusion of US combat mission is to make military gains before any sort of peace talks between the militants and the Afghan government starts. If the Taliban manage to make important gains on the ground, it would make it even more difficult for the government of Afghanistan to reach a peace deal that ends the conflict. The increased fighting could also be aimed at disrupting the peace talks as many in the Taliban are opposed to the talks. There is a race against time as another season of war and peace efforts is approaching. The Afghan government has few options, but there are always sufficient opportunities to do its job better.

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