

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



February 22, 2016

The Plight of Afghan Refugees

The bodies of seven Afghan refugees, drowned in the Aegean Sea while trying to reach the European countries, were returned to Kabul on Saturday. According to media reports, bodies of five other refugees from Afghanistan drowned recently in the Turkish waters are still missing. The authorities say the victims were members of three families who were all related. Afghan authorities announced recently that over 250,000 Afghans have sought refuge in more affluent industrial countries. However, since last year, hundreds of Afghans have lost their lives trying to reach to European countries. Unprecedented level of immigration of Afghans into foreign countries has evolved as a major challenge for the Afghan government.

The incident once again highlights the plight of Afghan refugees desperately trying to reach Europe. While many have already taken the precarious journey to refuge abroad, many others are desperately trying to leave the country in search of better living or because of fears of persecution and armed conflict. Many of the refugees trying to reach to European countries suffer untold hardships and sufferings, and some losing their lives. The refugees pay big amounts of money to people smugglers to take them to Europe. This is while an increasing number of refugees including Afghans making the journey find their situations in the destination countries not as desirable as they expected. Disappointed, the refugees demand help for returning to their countries of origin. On the other hand, the destination countries are gradually taking tougher stances over the ongoing migration.

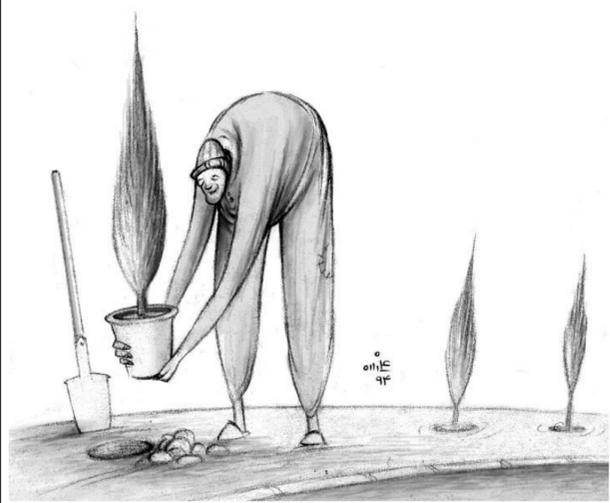
Along with security and economic challenges, migration is going to be a long-term challenge for Afghanistan. Seemingly, more and more Afghans are planning to leave the country, and there is no sight for end the humanitarian crisis in a near future. Hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of Afghans, mostly youths and young people, queue in front of the Afghan passport department to apply for receiving passports. The Afghan government has been unable to curb the flow of people out of the country as the internal challenges in the country continue to worsen. Instead, it has so far attempted to take measures which are not dealing the root causes of the current wave of people leaving the country. Many believe that the government is tacitly encouraging the European countries to send back the Afghan refugees by saying that it would accept the returnees.

Given that there is high chance of further deterioration of the situation, more Afghans will try to get out of the country. The ongoing insurgency of the Taliban and other militant groups is one of the key factors behind the migration of Afghans. Civilian casualties have been on the rise while the prospect of peace and stability in the country remains uncertain. However, the most important factor behind the immigration of Afghans to other countries seems to be economic hardships. A survey report suggested some months ago that the main cause of Afghans leaving the country is high level of unemployment and financial problems. According to the findings of the survey, other factors are insecurity and forced recruitment of youths by the militant groups. The Afghan migration problem would further deepen in the coming years if the destination countries continue to allow in refugees from the conflict zones like Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. The EU member countries have been quarreling for months to impose controls or even fully block the refugees' pathway through Eastern Europe into the West of the continent. The efforts to take a collective European measure have failed so far while member states have imposed unilateral border controls. The pull factors of destination countries and the internal challenges in Afghanistan would make it harder for the Afghan government to curb the flow of people out of the country. The government has been so far overwhelmed by the problem and failed to introduce long-term plans for persuading the Afghans not to leave the country.

The Afghan government would not be able to curb the flow of people out of the country without considerably improving security and providing economic opportunities.

In his speech in Munich, President Ghani urged the EU to implement economic projects if they do not want the refugees to come to the European countries. Initially, most of Afghans leaving the country were youths while the trend has changed recently and now many of the refugees are families and women. This is highly due to the open routes to Europe and the pull factors of the destination countries. If the trend remains the same, the problem would further compound. Only eliminating the pull factors would help to curb the flow.

In order to prevent young Afghans leaving the country, the Afghan government needs to boost economic conditions of the Afghans. Generating more employments is the key for convincing many of the young Afghans to stay and pursue opportunities that would exist in the country. Eventually, the ongoing migration to foreign countries should be viewed as part of the bigger picture of the instability in the country which can be resolved only through resolution of the conflict in the country.



Children's Vulnerability to Militancy

By Hujjatullah Zia

Insurgency has intensified within recent months and a large number of civilians were reportedly killed, mainly in 2015. Afghan children are particularly left at the mercy of militancy and used as a cannon fodder by the Taliban and like minded insurgent groups. Children suffered several challenges in the country within the last three decades of war, especially during the Taliban's regime, and their pain and anguish have no more been mitigated. It is believed that children bear the brunt of problems and Afghanistan is an unlucky place for them. Female children fall victim to violence and rape and male children are vulnerable to acts of terror.

Drops of blood still trickle down from the wounds of children's bodies riddled with bullets in battlefield - the children who fell for the Taliban's mouth-watering promises and were naïve enough to succumb to their radical ideology. Recruiting children as soldiers was rife among the Taliban from the very beginning. I remember vividly when a large number of children were studying in madrasahs during their regime in every nook and cranny of the country. Their minds were loaded with fundamental dictations to propel them for militancy and terror.

Based on Human Rights Watch research, the Taliban have been training and deploying children for a range of military operations including the production and planting of improvised explosive devices (IED). In Kunduz province, the Taliban have used madrasahs as hotbed of terror and to provide military training to teenagers many of whom have been deployed in combat.

"The Taliban's apparent strategy to throw increasing numbers of children into battle is as cynical and cruel as it is unlawful. Afghan children should be at school and at home with their parents, not exploited as cannon fodder for the Taliban insurgency," a senior Afghanistan researcher Patricia Gossman is cited as saying.

The Taliban elements seek to spread warped ideology in Afghanistan via founding seminaries. With a new wave of privately run seminaries/madrasahs being opened across the country, there is a growing feeling among women's rights groups that these freedoms are again under threat. Reportedly, there are now 1,300 unregistered madrasahs in Afghanistan, where children are given only religious teaching. This is increasing fears among those involved in mainstream education. Arguably the most controversial of these madrasahs is Ashraf-ul Madares in Kunduz, founded by two local senior clerics, where 6,000 girls study full time.

In spite of the Taliban's claims that they recruit fighters who have achieved "mental and physical maturity," and do not use underage boys in military operations, some of the children recruited from seminaries in Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakhshan provinces are 13 or younger. The Taliban have previously denied "the use of children and adolescents in Ji-

hadic Operations," but its deployment of individuals under the age of 18 violates international law applicable in Afghanistan and in cases involving children under 15 is a war crime. Human Rights Watch interviews with activists and analysts show that the Taliban-run seminaries have been functioning in Kunduz, as well as other northern provinces, since 2012. As the Taliban made heavy inroads in 2013-2014, gaining ground in Kunduz's Chahardara and Dasht-e Archi districts, they gained more influence over education in the province. Taliban commanders increasingly used madrasahs not only for indoctrination, but also for military training of children. "Previously, Taliban commanders sent boys selected for military training to North Waziristan in Pakistan, where despite Pakistan's military operations, the Taliban operates freely in large swathes of territory.

While such training still occurs, the Taliban has solidified its control over at least three districts in Kunduz and residents and analysts told Human Rights Watch that the group is carrying out more of the military training locally."

Leila Zerrougui, the UN special representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict, is quoted to say that "children between the ages of 10 and 15 were used by the Taliban and dozens of them were deployed" during the fighting in Kunduz in September and October 2015.

It is said that the Taliban recruit the children mostly from the poor families and support them financially in return. Moreover, children easily succumb to the Taliban's indoctrination and fall for their bogus claims since they have not reached mental maturity.

They are brainwashed in dark basements of madrasahs and kept out of touch.

International humanitarian law, or the laws of war, prohibits the recruitment or use of children under 15 by parties to a conflict. "Conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into armed forces or groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities" is a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), to which Afghanistan belongs.

Those who commit, order, assist, or have command responsibility for war crimes are subject to prosecution by the ICC or national courts.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which Afghanistan ratified in 2003, also places obligations on governments to "take all feasible measures to prevent such recruitment and use, including the adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices." Military forces also have an obligation to provide children with special respect and attention. The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that governments "take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict."

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The Inequality Puzzle

By Dambisa Moyo

Over the past decade, income inequality has come to be ranked alongside terrorism, climate change, pandemics, and economic stagnation as one of the most urgent issues on the international policy agenda. And yet, despite all the attention, few potentially effective solutions have been proposed. Identifying the best policies for reducing inequality remains a puzzle.

To understand why the problem confounds policymakers, it is helpful to compare the world's two largest economies. The United States is a liberal democracy with a market-based economy, in which the factors of production are privately owned. China, by contrast, is governed by a political class that holds democracy in contempt. Its economy - despite decades of pro-market reforms - continues to be defined by heavy state intervention.

But despite their radically different political and economic systems, the two countries have roughly the same level of income inequality. Each country's Gini coefficient - the most commonly used measure of income equality - is roughly 0.47.

In one important way, however, their situations are very different. In the US, inequality is rapidly worsening. In 1978, the top 1% of the US population was ten times richer than the rest of the country. Today, the average income of the top 1% is roughly 30 times that of the average person in the remaining 99%. During the same period, inequality in China has been declining.

This poses a challenge for policymakers. Free market capitalism has proved itself to be the best system for driving income growth and creating a large economic surplus. And yet, when it comes to the distribution of income, it performs far less well.

Most democratic societies have attempted to address the problem through left-leaning redistributive policies or right-leaning supply-side approaches. But neither seems to be particularly effective. In the US, income inequality has steadily widened under both Democratic and Republican administrations. China's success in this arena points to the possible advantages of its heavy-handed system - a conclusion that makes many Western policymakers uncomfortable.

One aspect of the discussion, however, need not be so controversial. Adding to the challenges of the policy debate are assertions that inequality is unimportant. If a rising tide is lifting all boats, the thinking goes, it doesn't matter that

some may be rising more slowly than others.

Those who argue for de-emphasizing income inequality maintain that public policy should seek to ensure that all citizens enjoy basic living standards - nutritious food, adequate shelter, quality health care, and modern infrastructure - rather than aiming to narrow the gap between rich and poor. Indeed, some contend that income inequality drives economic growth and that redistributive transfers weaken the incentive to work, in turn depressing productivity, reducing investment, and ultimately harming the wider community.

But societies do not flourish on economic growth alone. They suffer when the poor are unable to see a path toward betterment. Social mobility in the US (and elsewhere) has been declining, undermining faith in the "American Dream" (which includes the belief that hard work will make one better off than one's parents). Over the past 30 years, the probability that an American born into the bottom quartile of the income distribution will end his life in the top quartile has more than halved.

To be sure, much progress has been made. Over the past 50 years, as countries such as China and India posted double-digit economic growth, the global Gini coefficient dropped from 0.65 to 0.55. But further headway is unlikely - at least for the foreseeable future.

Economic growth in most emerging economies has slowed below 7%, the threshold needed to double per capita income in a single generation. In many countries, the rate has fallen below the point at which it is likely to make a significant dent in poverty.

This bleak economic outlook has serious consequences. Widening inequality provides fodder for political unrest, as citizens watch their prospects decline. Reports that just 158 wealthy donors provided half of all campaign contributions in the first phase of the 2016 US presidential election cycle highlight the worry that income inequality can lead to political inequality.

Globally, the slowdown in economic convergence has similar implications, as richer countries maintain their outside influence around the world - leading to disaffection and radicalization among the poor. As difficult a puzzle as income inequality may seem today, failing to solve it could lead to far more severe challenges. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

Dambisa Moyo, an economist and author, sits on the boards of several global corporations.

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