

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



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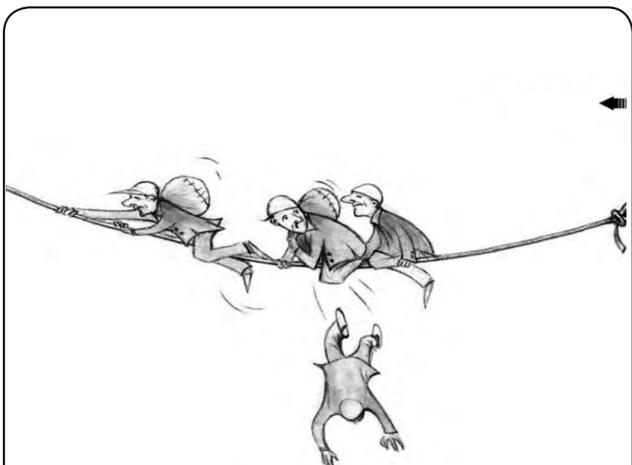
## Refugee Crisis Getting Serious

The world has entered 2016, with many issues, among which the refugee crisis is one of the most dominating one. According to statistics from United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) more than one million refugees have reached Europe by sea since the start of 2015, creating Europe's worst migrant crisis since World War II. Among these refugees around 200,000 are from Afghanistan. The statistics show that about 844,000 travelled to Greece from nearby Turkey. Most of the others - over 150,000 - crossed the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy. Alarmingly, the number of sea arrivals has increased vastly since 2014, when it was recorded at slightly more than 216,000. About 49 percent of those crossing the Mediterranean Sea are from Syria, with 21 percent coming from Afghanistan.

And, the reports also reveal that number of those dead or missing at sea is now at 3,735. The unfortunate fact is that the growing discontent in different parts of the world has made the number of refugees and asylum seekers rise to a great extent. At the moment, the crisis in Middle Eastern countries has compelled so many people to leave their countries and search shelter in European countries. Besides, there are many refugees who have travelled from Asian countries that are undergoing conflicts, disorders and discriminations. According to a statement from UNHCR, "The vast majority of those attempting this dangerous crossing are in need of international protection, fleeing war, violence and persecution in their country of origin." Afghanistan is at the top of the list among them. Decades of wars and terrorism coupled with droughts and shortages of basic needs have made millions of people to leave the country. Even though there has been decrease in this regard, millions of Afghan refugees are still living their lives in neighboring countries, like Iran and Pakistan, European countries, Australia, America and Canada; while, there are thousand others who are suffering in different sorts of camps and detention centers around the world waiting for some sort of sympathy and attention. The circumstances faced by these refugees are not always welcoming and they have to bear the brunt of different sorts of reactions. Though in some countries they are welcomed warmly, in others they are treated in a very cruel manner.

The migrants who leave their homelands are not always happy to do so. They have to face severe consequences for their action. Doubtful about their destinies they leave for the tracks that are not always smooth and merciful. There are many who become the victims of the hardships and accidents on the way. There have been many incidents wherein the Afghan refugees have been shot; they have drowned or have become the victims of the different sickness and even tiredness. The severe weather conditions have also devoured many lives. The paths that are followed by the refugees to reach Europe are covered by snow during the winter; yet again the refugees do not stop their journeys. This shows that they are really compelled by the circumstances that is why they are ready to take such risks.

The destiny of those Afghan refugees who have even reached to Europe is not known. European countries, influenced by the refugee crisis, are not on one page on how to tackle the situation. Currently, influenced by terrorist activities, many European countries have reservations regarding the in-take of refugees. Moreover, compensating such a large number of refugees is really a difficult task. The tension caused by the refugee crisis within the EU has made some states putting up fences and re-imposing frontier controls. Last week, the EU agreed to increase the number of Frontex agency staff in Greece, where most migrants arrive before travelling further into Europe. Germany says it has received more than a million refugees and migrants, the largest number of any European country, but this includes a large number from the Balkan states who are not counted in the sea arrivals. It is really vital that EU should reach to a comprehensive solution to the issue of the refugees. Deportation alone is not the solution of the problem as there are many refugees whose lives are really in danger. They need protection as per the international law. The issue of refugees is an international problem and needs proper attention from international community and concerned international organizations. The refugees who leave their homelands in search of better life, most of the times suffer different sorts of hardships before they reach somewhere safe. Most of them even do not reach to the destination they set for. On most of the occasions they fall prey to the ill intentions of human-smugglers, who discriminate them as much as they can. Furthermore, they have to go through severe kind of psychological depression and strain as they go through the worst sort of experiences. Definitely there are political and diplomatic concerns for all the governments of the world to consider, but the issue of refugees is more important than such concerns, as it involves the precious human lives and the lives of human beings stand more sacred than any other concern, belief or ideology.



## An Exclusive Interview with Abdur Razaq Vahidi, Minister of Communication and Information Technology

Daily Outlook: Mr. Vahidi, thank you so much for giving this opportunity to the Daily Outlook Afghanistan to ask questions on the latest developments and challenges of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector. Mr. Vahidi: It is my pleasure. Thanks for being here. We, as government entities, need all the print and digital media to clearly, vividly and correctly point out the efforts, successes, and bottle necks to communicate the truth with the citizens - and their representatives in the government. Also, in order to stop rumors from spreading in the first place, Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) is committed to share all the information as widely and as timely as possible.

Daily Outlook: Mr. Minister, How do you describe current status of MCIT in Afghanistan? Mr. Vahidi: Since 2001, the Telecom and ICT sector has seen significant progress. As per the recent statistics, there are about 18.5 million GSM subscribers and 400,000+ citizens are having access to fixed line and CMDA telephone services. Plus over 3 million have internet access; out of which almost 2 million use internet by 3G facilities provided by Telecom companies and the rest use internet through DSL and Satellites. Based on the Research conducted by USAID in 2012, 80% of women have direct and indirect access to mobiles. The estimated population coverage is 89% and almost \$2.5 billion invested in the sector.

It is worth mentioning that the Afghan post even though operating traditionally, provides both normal and express posting services for Afghan citizens - in and outside the country. Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority (ATRA) is more professional and active than past and there are new procedures and policies in place to monitor and control the quality and quantity of services delivered.

Daily Outlook: You only talked about the achievements. What are the challenges?

Mr. Vahidi: There are many challenges noticed and addressed since my employment with MCIT. I have noticed that Strategic Vision has been missing at the Leadership resulting in challenges like;

There had been many Policies implemented but not applied properly like dependence on Pakistan for Internet services increasing the cost and decreasing service quality. Some Policies were not even planned correctly and holistically like complete mismanagement of distribution of towers for mobile connectivity, creating problems. Aspects on the broader scale to create strategies were always missing; be it the cost of internet connection paid to Pakistan or connectivity issues related to mobile towers. There have been plans to privatize sectors which should not be done; like Afghan Telecom and ATRA to make sure private players do not exploit the citizens later on. There has been tendency to retain monopoly on fiber optics and others which was a total unnecessary action resulting in unfinished fiber optic cabling on national level. Infrastructures were not developed for citizen's benefit and now we are planning to implement an all-encompassing policy to open up sharing accesses. Ad-hoc process was followed and incomplete structures maintained like not having Earth Station in Kabul for AFSAT and not finding ways to use the free transponders. Real digitalization of TV was not done and it has been finished 2 months ago. Mobile Governance was not applied although infrastructure was ready there for so long. Electronic Governance is still in the womb and efforts are being made now to fix it. Simple basic functions in every Ministry today are time consuming and do not have one unified digitalized documentation system that will use one single platform. We have implemented easy electronic solution for the citizens in all the government offices. 70% employees of all Ministries even today do not have basic IT knowhow and it is amazing to know that it was not addressed before, but we are trying to solve that. We are working on capacity building projects for a long term solution. We are tying up with World Class Universities to make ICT a "Cradle of Technology".

Daily Outlook: So Mr. Minister, please tell us how do you plan to solve those?

Mr. Vahidi: We have devised 3 major Plans which once approved by the Cabinet and the Parliament encompass all these problems and will holistically solve all the above issues.

**Regional Connectivity:**  
We want to create a competitive environment among the regional countries to decrease internet price and increase the redundancy of the services. The long term objective of MCIT now is to transform Afghanistan into an e-Transit Hub in the region which will earn very substantial revenue for the country. Let me say that we are on the verge of creating "Digital Silk Route" and have already talked connecting all nearby countries including China via Wakhan Corridor.

Since last 8 months, it has been the priority of MCIT to improve quality of internet services for the end users. Since then we have noticed

two problems. First, we have been too much dependent on Pakistani route which is problematic as the internet rate is high and still the redundancy is low and secondly unplanned distribution of Telecom Based Stations was done in early days and telecom towers were delivered based on ad-hoc basis only. To address this, we have initiated Multi-Lateral and all-Inclusive negotiations with regional countries like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Iran, China and Russia.

**Open Access Policy:**

This will be the Mother of all future regulatory policies. It will be based upon co-operation, co-existence and also competition. I cannot explain the whole thing to you right now but let me say that this policy will be considered as the prime functional level Telecom Regulatory Policy and will abide by the basic core laws of the country. All existing and future private and public telecom and broadband companies will have to co-exist, coordinate and cooperate with each other. All the immovable physical assets will have to be shared and the one to share will get 10% loyalty every month from the one who is sharing. All movable physical assets will be allowed to be shared under mutual consent between two or more companies without others agreeing. No two or more individual companies can make any joint venture or tie up short term or long term outside this policy agreement as that will undermine its rules. All new business expansion by any organization will have to be shared on loyalty. All new companies entering this business should follow the same pattern.

**E-Governance:**

The step that we have taken so far is that we have planned to centralize the scattered platforms and Information Management Systems among different government agencies. An all-inclusive and realistic E-Governance Policy has been developed for this and we are in the pre-implementation phase for most of the aspects of e-governance. Although, we have conducted Pilot Tests within most government agencies but our main goal is to connect isolated islands of information which will result in transparency, accountability and efficiency in day to day management. We are focusing now on Electronic Circulation of Data and documents among the government agencies to make work done faster and transparent, whereas, we have already developed system for Passport Registration, processing and delivery.

E-Governance is not just a project, not just a program but rather requires work culture to change perception, attitude and performance. However let me say that we are committed to it and fortunately, international donors including the World Bank are eager to support us.

On the other hand, AFSAT 2, the 4th ambitious Project that MCIT planned to do is the Launch of AFSAT 2 by the end of 2016. We had talked with a few Space Organizations and we have been told within \$100 million we can get our own Satellite with 24 Transponders. Plus we also discussed that we can pay them in 10 year installments. We are hopeful international donors can give us around \$10 million per year for it.

Daily Outlook: Mr. Minister, give us an example of what you have done so far regarding the quality and price of internet?

Mr. Vahidi: By Regional connectivity plan, MCIT was following to objectives. The first one was to decrease our dependence to Pakistan and find some alternative routes for internet provision. Fortunately, we have finalized recently contracts of two 10GBs with Kazakhstan at costs of \$75,000 and \$85,000 and with Iran at cost of \$105,000 which are much cheaper and redundant as compared to that of Pakistan. Another 10GB contract has already been signed with Kirgizstan and is now under technical testing. Once these contracts are operationalized, I can assure you that the internet price will fall down substantially and the end-users will have high quality services. It is worth mentioning that by importing the internet from Kazakhstan, we have partially achieved the long term objective which was to promote Afghanistan into a Data Transit Hub in the region. Daily Outlook: You talked about the absence of strategic vision in ICT sector, what is it that makes you look and work differently?

Mr. Vahidi: I am working to move gradually from "Project-oriented Approach" to a "Program Oriented" one. I am totally concentrating on Identifying regional potentials for Afghanistan. Modernize and revise the Regulatory needs, creating a National Telecom Development Plan which does not exist, implementing Mobile Governance, Mobile Voting, restarting e-Tazkara, starting e-passport.

Let me tell you that Developing New Policy are ICT industry growth policy, ATRA's internal procedure, Quality control and measurement procedure, Open Access Policy, New Cyber Security Laws, Electronic Transaction Law, Digital Signature Law, National Telecom Development Plan.

I can affirm that once the new laws are approved by the Cabinet and the Parliament; and are enforced, the environment will change and will become more welcoming.

Daily Outlook: Fiber Optics is being considered one of the most important project in Afghani-

stan, would you please tell us about the progress in this project?

Mr. Vahidi: According to our recent updates, 23 provinces are connected to the fiber optics backbone. Five provinces are already under process funded by World Bank and will be completed by 2017. The new plan called Fiber to Homes (FTH) is being implemented in major cities of Afghanistan. Remaining 8 provinces were left undone due to several reasons such as lack of financial resources, insecurity and lack of road alignments. During the last few months, I was focused to solve the financial issue. Fortunately, World Bank has initially supported our plan and there are some groups of private investors who are ready to finance the projects. I can assure that during next few years all provinces of Afghanistan will be connected to Fiber Optics Network. I am 100% committed to implement this national project.

In the past, there was also lack of coordination and cooperation noticed between infrastructure-oriented organizations. We have made an initiative and are now at final stage of signing MoUs with relevant agencies such as Da-Afghanistan Brishna Shirkat, MRRD, Municipalities, MoUDA and MoPW. Once the MoUs are signed, the operation costs will decrease and the work speed for expanding fiber Optics will increase.

There was no clear policy for providing for inviting the private sector to invest in key infrastructure programs such as Fiber Optics. Recently, our technical team has developed Open Access Policy and this will be soon presented to Cabinet for approval. Once finalized, we can encourage private investors to invest in development and expansion of the Network throughout the country. I am sure that the policy will help us make the FTH a reality within coming years.

Daily Outlook: what are your achievements in E-Governance?

Mr. Vahidi: We have finalized MoUs with 9 key ministries plus an Independent organization. Under this MoUs, MCIT will work closely with the government ministries and provide them with technical expertise and support for implementing E-Governance. This process is led by H.E Ahmad Zia Masood, the President's Special Representative for Good Governance.

MCIT has conducted a thorough assessment in ministries to measure the existing technical capacities and to identify the gaps for E-Governance. The study will be used for the implementation of the program within the government agencies; the very first component will be connecting the existing communication and documentation systems.

The digital distribution of national passport is finalized by MCIT and has been approved by the cabinet. MCIT has already prepared the electronic systems for online registration, payment and distribution. Three agencies involved in the process which includes MCIT, Da-Afghanistan Bank and the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MoIA). MoUs for cooperation have been developed and will be signed next week. We are working at the piloting stage with the two other mentioned organizations. Once, finalized, we will launch the program. From my point of view this initiative will be recorded as an important milestone for E-Governance in Afghanistan. The digital process of the passports distribution will add to the transparency of the process creates more facilities for the citizens and will revive Afghan Post which has been ignored during the recent years.

Daily Outlook: Mr. Minister, you made me go deep into the modern world of technology and innovations. Is there any message you would like to share at the end?

Mr. Vahidi: Let me once again thank you for providing me this opportunity. In MCIT, we are here to protect interest of Afghans and Afghanistan and will try our best to provide every Afghan the best services they deserve. But do not forget that there are Limitations and Challenges. MCIT is committed to transform Afghanistan into a "Modern Information Society". We all need to wait a little and to see the further improvements.

Thank You

Introduction:

Mr. Abdur-Razaq Vahidi obtained his B.S and MS Degrees from Esfahan University of Iran. After returning to Afghanistan, he was appointed as a member of the Kankor Committee to computerize the National Entrance Exam. In 2005, he joined UNESCO - to help in developing the plans and strategies of Ministry of Education (MoE).

In 2006, Mr. Razaq Vahidi was appointed as the Director General of administrative department in the Ministry of Finance. In 2010, Mr. Vahidi was promoted to the position of Chief of Staff by the Minister of Finance, Dr. Ahadi. Then, he was appointed as the Deputy Minister for Administrative affair by former President, Hamid Karzai. On April 21, 2015 He was appointed as the Minister for Communications and Information Technology.

This Interview is conducted to provide our readers with the latest progress, achievements and prospects of Telecommunication sector in Afghanistan.



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