

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



January 10, 2016

## Peace Talks with Taliban

As the date for the quadrilateral meeting between Afghanistan, China, US and Pakistan is nearing, the suspense seems to be rising as what will happen; as the previous efforts for peace talks between Taliban and Afghanistan could not bear any fruit. After Pakistan's willingness to host talks between Taliban and Afghan government, this is going to be a preparatory meeting as the first meeting hosted by Pakistan in Muree, Pakistan could not be pursued after increasing distrust hampered the talks. However, since the Heart of Asia Conference, a new commitment has been developed between Islamabad and Kabul to restart the process.

For Afghanistan it is going to be a great opportunity to start a peace process with Taliban and end the ongoing fight with them through peaceful ways. Though, Afghanistan has been doubtful about Pakistan's role regarding the efforts for the talks, this time it may not be disappointed as US and China are also a part of the effort directly. For US it is a matter of honor now, as it would like to see a comparatively peaceful Afghanistan, after its troops completely leave it. While, for China, it is really important because of the regional peace as it, itself, has been influenced by religious extremism as well.

US has confirmed that it will be part of the meeting next week. US Department spokesman John Kirby has said, "We plan to participate in this quadrilateral meeting next week. No Taliban are going to be participating in this coordination meeting." He also added that the meeting is aimed at coordinating Afghan, Pakistani, Chinese, and U.S efforts to set the conditions for peace in Afghanistan. For Afghanistan the most important factor is the conditions that it is going to set. One of the greatest achievements will be to convince Taliban insurgents to lay down their arms before the next fighting season starts. Currently, Taliban have increased their attacks in the capital Kabul, which clearly shows that they want to acquire a stronger position in the talks before they start. However, these attacks are also taking the lives of innocent civilians. Therefore, it is necessary that a ceasefire should be agreed upon even before the talks start.

On the other hand, Afghanistan would require to convince Pakistan for a better role regarding dealing with the extremist elements in future. According to an op-ed in Newsweek from Zalmai Khalilzad (former American ambassador to Afghanistan and U.S permanent representative to the UN) and James Dobbins (US diplomat), "Washington and Kabul should focus less on fostering talks and more on persuading Pakistan to take action against those engaged in terrorism and violence. While opening peace talks could be a positive step, it will only yield fruit if Pakistani authorities also begin to close down Afghan Taliban military operations. Without Pakistani initiative, talks with the Taliban are unlikely to succeed. Perhaps with Pakistani consent and support the Taliban will continue to push their advantage on the ground. Alternatively, given ground realities, the Taliban might demand that the United States and Afghanistan cede provinces in the east and the south to them." At the same time Kabul must also consider that in the last some years, Afghanistan has been able to achieve certain milestones regarding human rights and particularly the rights of women. There are evident fears that Taliban would not readily accept that Afghanistan should retain these gains as they want to implement their self-styled Shariah law, which does not have room for some of the basic human rights and particularly no tolerance for women rights. Their reign in Afghanistan clearly depicted their attitude and behavior towards women.

Emphasizing on the same, the Rights activists on Saturday, Jan 09, called on the Afghan government to consider the gains the nation has made over the last 15 years when drawing up the framework for peace talks with the Taliban. They reaffirmed their support for the meeting next week but they also called for the protection of women rights and other achievements made after the downfall of Taliban. They also emphasized on the Afghan government to consider what is best for the nation and not forget the sacrifices made by the nation and different individuals.

Afghanistan's fate largely depends on the decisions that are going to be made in the few years to come. Particularly, the nature and the outcomes of the peace talks with Taliban would be of great importance (if they are held at all). Prudent and wise decisions and conditions set by Afghan government would not only result into a peaceful Afghanistan but a better Afghanistan as well. So many soldiers of the country, different individuals and the nation as a whole have given numerous sacrifices only to make this country a better place to live for the generations to come and we have to respect all those sacrifices.

# The Worries over the Upcoming Taliban Offensive

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Concerned over the security situation across the country in spring next year, the Lower House of the parliament summoned top security officials on Saturday, demanding explanations on how the security agencies are prepared to take pre-emptive actions against the insurgent groups before the start of the spring fighting season. MPs are concerned that the government is lacking a comprehensive anti-insurgency plan while the opportunity is being lost. The Ministers of Defense and Interior Affairs and the acting head of the National Directorate of Security tried to assure the Wolesi Jirga that the government is prepared to defend the country against Taliban. However, the parliament did not seem to be convinced of the explanations delivered by the three top security officials over preparations and commitment of the security agencies curb the insurgency.

There are widespread concerns over how the anti-insurgency campaign of the Afghan government would go on and how it would manage to deal with a more hard-headed insurgency. As explained by the security officials, the insurgent groups would continue to mount deadly offensives against the Afghan government next year aimed at seizing more grounds from government forces. The fact that the war would continue unabatedly is daunting the Afghan public who desperately hope to see the end of the bloodshed. There are also suggestions that the insurgent groups including the Taliban and the Islamic State group may try to escalate the war far beyond the levels of previous years. This means that the Afghan security forces will be engaged in a much more difficult campaign against the insurgent groups and there would be much more enormous challenges ahead.

Last year, some provinces turned into hotbed of insurgency. Some northern provinces particularly Kunduz as well as some parts of the eastern and southern parts of the country namely Helmand, Nangarhar and Ghazni provinces were scenes of intense fighting between government forces and the insurgent groups. The insurgent groups managed to achieve considerable gains in terms of publicity and taking grounds, though mostly temporary, from the government. The militants are now posed to strengthen their last year achievements. According to some MPs, the militants aim to expand the war in some provinces of the northern parts of the country, as the militants are expanding supply routes for the group's next season of fighting. The officials expect that the insurgents would mainly focus on targeting major cities as well as highways, a strategy that seem to be more ambitious and would pursue more brazen tactics to achieve its objectives.

The security agencies suffered major shortcomings and deficiencies in the campaign against the insurgent groups last year. The army and police forces suffered high casualties in the fight, and is continuing to suffer a high level of tolls in the fight against the Taliban. The high rate of desertion and casualties against the Taliban would remain one of the biggest vulnerabilities of the Afghan security forces. The Afghan army lacks an operational air force to

provide support to the army units engaged in the fight against the insurgents. The government needs to strengthen the armed forces in terms of weaponry, equipment and fighting capabilities to lead the campaign in a sustained way. The national unity government has been trying to reach out to NATO and the United States for provision of equipment and weaponry to the Afghan air force. Some remarkable steps have been taken in equipping the air force with warplanes and weapons.

The most obvious vulnerability of the government forces was lack of coordination among the army units fighting on the frontlines of the battlefields in far remote areas of the country. Due to lack of proper coordination, the army and police forces suffered high casualties and lost grounds to the insurgents. The acting minister of defense pointed to the issue saying that it was a mistake to deploy forces in all fronts, leading the Afghan forces to fight from a weaker position while the insurgents used mass assault tactics in most of their assaults. He said that the government would focus on repelling large-scale attacks organized by the insurgents. Given that the Taliban gained the highest advantages from their war strategy last year, the group would focus again on launching large-scale attacks on major towns and cities as well government offices.

The winter season is an opportunity for the Afghan government to escalate the offensives against the insurgent groups. But there are widespread criticisms towards the government agencies as they are losing the opportunity of the winter lull in the fighting with the Taliban. The Taliban and other groups are reportedly preparing for the next year fighting season against the government with establishing supply routes among various provinces of the north and focusing on gaining ground in some volatile districts of provinces in the south. As last year, it is highly anticipated that Kunduz in the north, Helmand in the south, Nangarhar and some other provinces in the east of the country would remain as hotspots of insurgency.

The government has the opportunity in the winter season to disrupt preparations made by the insurgent groups in these provinces for the next year fighting season.

Next year will be a crucial year for the Afghan security forces to reverse the gains made this year by the Taliban and other insurgent groups. The next years will be decisive in defining the future of the country. As the government will struggle to resolve the conflict through political means, the security agencies need to contain the militant groups and foil their efforts for overthrowing the government. The Taliban succeeded in establishing a prominence for itself for staying as a long-term insurgency in the country and a potential threat for the sustainability of the armed forces and the political system. The armed forces need to devise a comprehensive transitional defense strategy and lead a more aggressive war against the insurgent groups. The army and police forces need to remain prepared for leading a sustained anti-insurgency campaign.

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## Fire or Ceasefire?

By Hujjatullah Zia

A midst a wave of concerns that the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is gaining firm foothold in Afghanistan, the Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah has declared that the presence of the loyalists to the ISIL is not a significant force. Admitting that the terror group poses threat not only to Afghanistan but also to the entire region, Abdullah said that Afghanistan is determined to deal with the terror group loyalists as the Afghan government continues to work with its international allies to deal with the security challenges. "It [ISIL] is a threat. It is a threat for Afghanistan. It is a threat for region. It is a threat for global peace and Afghanistan is determined to deal with it and at the same time it is not as significant force in Afghanistan as Taliban," Abdullah is quoted as saying.

This remark by Abdullah comes as the US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter warned regarding the emergent threat of the militant group during a surprise visit to Afghanistan in late December 2015, however he said that the threat posed by the terror group is being tracked very closely as they have started creating "little nests" in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the commander of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan Gen. John Campbell earlier said the loyalists to the militant group are attempting to establish a regional base in Jalalabad, the capital city of eastern Nangarhar province. According to him, the foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq had joined the loyalists to the terror group in eastern Nangarhar province and are trying to consolidate links with the leadership of the militant group based in Syria and Iraq.

Afghan nation passed a deadly year and scores of civilians and combatants were killed by the Taliban's spring offensive and suicide bombings.

The Muree peace talk was stalled and the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mansour as Taliban's leader deteriorated the security situation across the country. Subsequently, tension among the Taliban elements surfaced which led to splinter group. After all, with the emergence of the ISIL militant group in Afghanistan, a number of the Taliban insurgents pledged allegiance with Baghdadi's caliphate. The ISIL ushered in systematic crimes, such as abducting Afghan travelers, beheading members of ethnic minority group, including women and children, murdering people via placing bombs on their bodies and exploding, etc. Now, there are rumors that the ISIL will intensify its attacks in coming spring and the security will deteriorate in the country. Hence, Afghan government will encounter security crisis from two sides: the Taliban and ISIL militant

groups - if the crises remain unaddressed in due time, 2016 will be deadlier, compared to the last year, for the nation.

There is no matter of optimism that the ISIL is not as dangerous as the Taliban militants. Taliban ruled Afghanistan for five years and knows every nooks and crannies in the country and it is more than a decade that the Taliban guerilla fighters carry out terrorist attacks and suicide bombings in our land, whereas the ISIL has emerged no more than a year ago. Hence, it would be highly surprising if this emerging group changed into puissant force, the same as the Taliban, overnight. Rather than inculcating people with false hope, the officials will have to counter insurgency with strong determination and combat ISIL group with all its force so as to prevent it from gaining firm foothold in the country. It should be noted that if ISIL succeeds to form connection with the leadership in Iraq and Syria, dismantling this terrorist network will be near to impossible in Afghanistan.

The resumption of peace talk between Afghanistan and the Taliban is again in the limelight. US, China and Pakistan seek to play mediatory role in reconciliation process. "The first option is peace and the second option is terror and horror. Those who choose the first option we are ready to talk with them but those who select the second option then we have already responded to them and we will respond to them in the future as well," said president's deputy spokesman Sayed Zafar Hashemi.

In addition, Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) is also optimistic about the resumption of peace negotiation and said that the Taliban splinter group under the leadership of Mullah Rasoul had shown interest in the peace talks.

"The Taliban's splinter group under the leadership of Mullah Rasoul has announced that they are ready for peace talks. However our position is that if the opposition speaks from one address it is good and if any group is ready for peace the government is ready to talk with that group," Shahzada Shahid HPC spokesman is cited as saying. According to him, "If talks are not held with the Taliban and peace is not secured, ISIL will start its attack with much intensity and not only will Afghanistan suffer but regional countries and the world will be affected by it."

A peaceful Afghanistan is of high significance for the region and vice versa. Therefore, the entire region is needed to play its part for a stable Afghanistan. Since, the ISIL militants talk with the barrel of gun, only military deal will come to fruition. However, Afghan officials have already left two choices for the Taliban elements: "The first option is peace and the second option is terror and horror" and it is they to choose one.

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