

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



January 23, 2016

Heinous Attack on Media Personnel

In a heinous act, a Taliban suicide car bomber detonated explosives on a bus that was carrying staff members from TOLO TV in Darulaman Road in Kabul on Wednesday evening, killing at least seven staff members, which included three female employees, and wounded 26 others. The employees were on their way home but could never reach their homes as they were targeted by the suicide bomber. The attack marked another deadly suicide attack on Afghan civilians in a current series of bombings in the city.

This attack raises a lot of questions and concerns. The first one is definitely, regarding the security arrangements in the capital; the basic question is again the same - how could an explosive-laden car reach to Darulaman Road despite so many security check posts that have been created around the city? How couldn't such a car be tracked down when the authorities always claim that they have guarded the city properly?

A concern that seems to be intensifying after this attack is regarding the lives of the civilians. As civilians are not directly part of the conflict; therefore, they should never be targeted. Targeting of civilians by the terrorists for their filthy objectives has no justification and should never be tolerated. Both the international law and the Islamic teachings go against targeting the civilians at the time of a conflict or a war. Though Taliban consider themselves as the upholders of the Islamic teachings, they know nothing about them in the true sense. And, they have kept on targeting the civilians directly or indirectly for spreading terror among the people. It can, therefore, be observed that the attack received a widespread global condemnation on Thursday, with various world countries, activists and media organizations denouncing it as attack on the freedom of expression.

United Nations Security Council also condemned the attack in the strongest terms and it said in a statement that the Security Council strongly condemns the fact that this heinous crime, beyond attacking the lives of civilians, also aims at the right of all Afghans to the freedom of expression. It also emphasized that there is a need to bring perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts of terrorism to justice, and urged all states, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, to cooperate actively with the Afghan authorities in this regard.

Amnesty International also condemned the attack and urged the Afghan government to take effective steps to stem the tide of violence against journalists, and in particular calls on the authorities to conduct thorough, prompt, impartial and transparent investigations into this and other violent, attacks.

It is really very imperative that the perpetrators in this sort of attacks must be brought to justice so that a lesson could be taught to the ones who want to keep them continue. This attack was no doubt also an attack on the freedom of expression. Recently, there has been uproar by the extremist elements regarding the material in the media. They consider most of the contents in media as non-Islamic and are also concerned about the role and the appearance of women in different TV channels, which they claim as vulgar. However, they are blind to understand that there are many other aspects of the modern Afghan media as well that have brought broad-mindedness among the people and at the same time taught them civic manners and activism. In fact, the modern Afghan media has strived not only to bring timely information to the public but it has also functioned as a check on different governmental and non-governmental policies that influence the public.

As the media personnel and journalists provide a very valuable service to the people, they have certain rights as well that should be protected by the governments and different organizations and institutions. Mostly, the societies that are well developed and have great respect for knowledge and information, make sure that their rights are guarded properly and they are provided with such circumstances wherein they are able to perform their responsibilities with full dedication and devotion.

On the other hand, the societies that suffer from political instability and experience wars, and disturbances and do not recognize the worth of true knowledge, information and entertainment and tend to forget the vital responsibility of guarding those rights. Thus, the media personnel and journalists in such societies tend to suffer from different sorts of discriminations and, unfortunately, even lose their lives.

Ill-fatedly, Afghanistan is also one of the countries that have not been giving enough heed to the rights of media personnel and journalists. The war and conflicts and the negligence of the relevant authorities have resulted in different sorts of discrimination against them in the country. Afghan government and different other organizations and groups must make sure that they strive to protect their rights as they are not a party to the conflict and do not serve anyone's purpose except that of the public.

Afghanistan Sides with the Doves

By Hujjatullah Zia

The Afghan government has constantly offered an olive branch to warring factions by calling them to come to negotiating table. The establishment of High Peace Council (HPC) and officials' persistent pushes for talk epitomize the state's goodwill. Within the last decade, Afghan authorities knocked all doors to bring in security and protect the public rights and dignity in a society void of violence and bloodshed. With the Taliban's downfall, the nascent democracy filled the air with a sense of hope and people dreamt of forming a utopian society. On the contrary, the Taliban never declared a truce and kept targeting combatants and non-combatants alike heavily. The nation's human rights were trampled upon and Taliban militants sought to impose their warped beliefs on locals, in restive districts, with the barrel of gun.

Similarly, they pressurized the government, for obtaining their political interests, through spilling the blood of innocent men, women and children. After all, the Taliban envoy who had travelled to a Kabul house that fateful night, ostensibly to discuss peace, carried a more deadly message inside his turban, which murdered the head of High Peace Council (HPC) Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani - it was a blatant ridicule and strong refusal to the government's offer.

Despite the Taliban's terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, which led to heavy casualties among civilians, the peace negotiation is back on the limelight.

Reportedly, a second round of four-nation talks aimed at re-activating peace negotiations with the Taliban began in Kabul last Monday, even as the insurgents wage an unprecedented winter campaign of violence across Afghanistan. Delegates from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States (US) convened in the Afghan capital for a one-day meeting seeking a negotiated end to the bloody 14-year insurgency.

"There isn't a single Afghan family that hasn't been affected by the daily acts of brutal and deadly terrorism carried out across our cities, towns, and villages.

Our children - girls and boys - are attacked on their way to school and our mosques and public spaces are blown up all in the name of a noble religion, which in reality stands for peace and peaceful coexistence."

Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani is cited as saying. According to him, any further delay on the part of the group to join the peace talks would further isolate them in the eyes of the Afghan people, and expressed hope that the Quadrilateral Coordination Committee (QCC) would "find ways to collectively deal with those refusing to come to talks".

However, the Taliban have not officially commented on the four-nation talks, however, section of the media quoted named Taliban leaders as saying that they would not hold talks with

the Afghan government.

The Taliban leaders said they want talks with the US first to talk about an end to the invasion, removal of restrictions from their top leaders and release of Taliban detainees under the US custody.

Pakistan's foreign affairs adviser Sartaj Aziz said that certain Confidence Building Measures can play a key role in encouraging Taliban groups to join the negotiation process, suggesting a "realistic and flexible roadmap for charting the course of action to broadly define steps and phases, but avoid unrealistic targets and deadlines."

Regarding the heavy militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan, he believed that the US policy-makers are responsible. He said, "The US created 'holy warriors' in our tribal areas during the 'Afghan Jihad' and then left them as soon as the war was over, a factor which contributed to decades of instability in Pakistan and the region." Aziz's remarks came as a reaction to the US President's recent statement, which said that Pakistan will remain in turmoil for decades.

Barack Obama has said: "...instability will continue for decades in many parts of the world - in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan, in parts of Central America, in Africa, and Asia. Some of these places may become safe havens for new terrorist networks. Others will just fall victim to ethnic conflict, or famine, feeding the next wave of refugees."

It is believed that Obama's prediction about continuation of violence and terror is based on the unabated militancy and emerging of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) - which has also led to a formation of "ISIL-K" in Afghan-Pak border, according to the US recent findings. After all, the terrorism has been changed into a proxy war in Syria and involved superpowers in the war.

In other words, the terrorist networks have been multiplied recently and terrorism is changed into a highly complicated issue.

The mercenary fighters are used as pawns in political games. Therefore, his prediction does not seem far from the truth and it is what the current situation demonstrates.

It is not right to make a mountain out of a molehill. Seemingly, Obama made a prediction as a political figure and everyone is entitled to do so. Now, the world and the international community have to find a panacea for the problem and mitigate the militancy in one way or another.

The delegates from China, Pakistan and the United States have convened to broker the peace talk via amicable conversation and therefore, the sore points must be avoided.

Afghanistan's stance is clear: it has always sided with the doves and cherished hope for peace and security.

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The Prospect of Women's Rights in Peace Talks

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

A women's rights organization in Afghanistan has expressed concerns over possible compromise of the rights of the Afghan women in the peace talks with the Taliban. In a report on women's status in the peace process, Women and Children Legal Research Foundation has mentioned barriers to women's participation in the process of peace negotiations with the Taliban. The women rights advocacy group has stated that opposition of the Taliban and apparent unwillingness of the Afghan authorities against participation of women in the peace process jeopardize women's rights in the process of talks with the militant groups. The group called on the government to ensure sufficient participation of the Afghan women in the peace talks.

The Afghan government last week hosted a meeting of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) - Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States - to establish a roadmap for peace talks with the Taliban. It was the second of such meetings and the third meeting is set to be held again in February in the Pakistani capital Islamabad. The four-party talks are viewed as highly promising for another round of genuine peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban after failure of many attempts to kick-start negotiations with the militant groups. However, what has been always worrying for many is prospect of civil rights and women's status negotiating peace with Taliban.

Afghan activists say while a number of women have membership of the High Peace Council, there was no woman representing Afghan women in the four-nation talks in Kabul and Islamabad. The national unity government has assured that women's rights would not be up to compromises in the talks for a peace deal in the country. President Ashraf Ghani has asserted that parts of the constitution related to the rights of the citizens and the structure of the political system in the country would not be up to negotiations in the peace process. Despite the pledges, absence of women representatives in the four-way talks for resumption of the peace negotiations with the militant groups could be an indication of a waning commitment of the government for active participation of the women in the process.

Inevitably, the matter of women's rights would be one of the key issues in any peace negotiations with the Taliban. In the last fourteen years, the Taliban maintained its misogynistic stance in the past over a decade of the conflict by burning down schools and pouring acid on school girls. The Taliban continue to impose severe punishments against women such as stoning without going through proper judicial processing. Given the views of the Taliban on women's rights, the group would surely demand renegotiation of women's rights and

freedoms in the course of peace talks. Imposing violent Taliban-style Sharia is one of the key objectives of the militant group in their campaign against the government. The government has not specifically described how it will protect women's rights in the course of the talks and what will be the red lines in the discussions.

With the onset of the phase of formal talks, the Afghan government will be tested for its commitment in protecting women's rights while negotiating with the Taliban. The Taliban were suppressive to women during their rule in Afghanistan, and remained hostile to women's public presence in the last fifteen years of their insurgency in the country. Under the Taliban rule, girls were not allowed to go to schools and women were banned from going out without accompany of a male family member. However, the group has hinted some flexibility towards educating girls, signifying a considerable shift in the group's approach on women's rights. For the first time since the fall of their regime in 2001, Taliban members sat face to face with Afghan women representative in Norway last year and discussed the prospect of peace and women's rights in Afghanistan. The meeting in Norway marked a milestone for Taliban sitting at the same level with women activists discussing peace and rights issues.

Despite some flexibility from the Taliban over women's rights, the fact is that the Taliban is not prepared for accepting all rights for women as envisaged in the Afghan constitution. The Afghan government has said it is ready for negotiating the constitution, though making exceptions for chapters on rights and government's system. This makes some crucial achievements of the past fifteen years including women's rights particularly vulnerable to unexpected compromises between the two sides. The Afghan government needs to start campaigning for promotion of women's rights on the national level before any formal talks with the Taliban starts.

The government must remain committed to promote women's rights and would not leave it open for negotiations with the insurgent groups. For this, the government needs to take specific measures to ensure the public and pro-rights groups that women's rights would be protected in the course of peace negotiations with the Taliban. Specific measures for boosting women's representation in the process of peace negotiation would not only safeguard women's rights for the future but also strengthens the government's stance in the negotiations with the militant groups.

Women representatives will be able to play an important role in boosting the Afghan government's stance in the negotiations with the Taliban. If the government fails to provide sufficient representation for women in the peace process, it would be forced to negotiate rights issues from a weaker position against the Taliban.

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