

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



January 24, 2016

## All Children Must Get Education

A couple of weeks earlier a report by United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) presented a very gloomy picture of the plight of Afghan children. According to the report, forty percent of Children in Afghanistan are out of school, which is mostly because of decades of instability and conflict in the country. The report also revealed that Afghanistan is 4th among 22 countries affected by conflict.

It is really unfortunate that so many children in Afghanistan do not get the chance of going to school and getting education, which can support them in gaining awareness and at the same time finding a better way of living. Getting education can also support them in becoming a vigilant member of the society, who could be able to contribute something positive for the society as a whole.

In fact, for many families in Afghanistan, sending the children to school is a luxury which they cannot afford. As the economic and social conditions are troublesome, there are many families that cannot even find the rudimentary requirements of life; therefore, the children can support them in finding those requirements instead of going to school.

Families, stricken with intense poverty, do not hesitate even to send their children for begging. Apart from that, there are professional beggars who utilize the helpless children for the begging purposes. The children are even abducted for the same purpose.

On the other hand, the insecurity has further raised concerns and there are many families that do not send their children to school because of the same concerns. As, Taliban have mostly been against the modern education; therefore, on many occasions they have directly targeted the schools along with the innocent children. On many occasions, they have even threatened the people not to send their children to schools and instead send them to madressahs. Particularly, they have been against the education of the girls and there have been many incidents wherein the girl students have been discouraged. Their schools have been bombed or poisoned. Their families have been victimized and even acid has been thrown on the girls who go to schools. These all factors contribute largely in discouraging the children from going to schools.

If the children are not going to school, they also have the disadvantage of becoming the victim of so many other evils. As UNICEF report explained, "When children are not in school, they are at an increased danger of abuse, exploitation, and recruitment into armed groups." Mostly, the parents are not there to guard the children against the social evils all the times; therefore, they can easily fall prey to them as they are not mature enough to judge what is beneficial for them.

The involvement of armed forces in this regard is really embarrassing. The recruitment that is carried out by militant groups is mostly for the purpose of carrying out suicide attacks through them, who because of their immaturity or because of the intense pressure do not understand the incentive of their actions.

There have been many incidents of suicide attacks in different parts of the country, wherein the attacker were below 16 years of age. Apart from that the children are also welcomed by the militant groups with the intention to have a cadre that they can train in accordance to their own will, within their training camps.

Recruitment of the children by militants will definitely result in violence against children and their abuse. The attitude of a trained militant clearly depicts the fact that the training sessions in their training camps do involve severe kind of violence and maltreatment. There have been certain incidents wherein the trainees of such camps have made confessions about the way they are treated. They disclosed that they were beaten and tortured and even raped by their tutors.

Another type of violence includes the killing and maiming of the children because of the conflict-related violence. This also includes accidental killings or injuries by the national and international security forces, which, though relatively are much lower than the ones committed by the terrorists. Unfortunately, most of the deaths or injuries in this regard have been the result of the violent attacks of the terrorists on schools and hospitals. Such attacks do not only take precious lives but tend to inflict fear among parents and children regarding attending schools.

The security of the children against all sort of violence, their proper nourishment, their character development and particularly their education are the most important considerations to contemplate on, if the government is really serious to safeguard the rights of the children. The same children are going to be the builders of future; their proper care should be ascertained through every possible means. Apart from the government the members of the society can also play a tremendous role in diminishing violence against the children, uplifting their morale and providing them modern education. It is necessary to understand that educated children would ultimately support in creating and educated and developed society.



# Targeting Free Press in Afghanistan

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

The Wednesday attack on staffs' vehicle of Moby group came as the first major militant attack selectively targeting media in Afghanistan. The attack shocked the nation and sparked condemnations from the international community. In reaction to the attack, President Ashraf Ghani called it an attack "not only on journalists, but on our constitution and exalted values". The president said the freedom of expressions would be non-negotiable, referring to the peace talks with the militant groups. Taliban have claimed responsibility for the deadly attack which killed seven staffers and injured about 25 others. Condemning the Wednesday attack, the United Nations Security Council has demanded prosecution of the perpetrators, organizers and supporters of the attack. The international rights advocacy group Human Rights Watch said that the anti-government groups in Afghanistan should immediately stop their deliberate attacks on civilians.

The attack on staff members of the Moby media group came after the Taliban earlier accused two private TV channels of bias in reporting from the conflict in Kunduz province last year. The Taliban designated members of the two TV channels as their legitimate military target. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the attack on Wednesday was the first in its scale against the media in Afghanistan. It was in fact a declaration of war against the free press in Afghanistan, something the Taliban had avoided to do before. Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists as dozens of journalists being killed by militant groups every year. The already precarious environment for Afghan journalists is now becoming particularly unsafe as the Taliban are threatening to deliberately target the journalists.

Designating media organizations as legitimate military targets is indicating a shift in Taliban approach to the freedom of expressions and the activities of the free press in Afghanistan. Pursuing more aggressive militant campaigns on the ground, the militants aim to further boost the group's propaganda machine along with its military offensive. However, the free and independent press in the country is viewed by the militants as the biggest hurdle against their war propagandas. The Taliban have been pressurizing Afghan journalists to include the group's media wing as the source of their reporting from of the situation and the casualties on the ground. This is while the Taliban media outlets are never reliable sources for news as they grossly exaggerate the events on the ground for Taliban victories.

The Wednesday attack in Kabul is going to be a major test for the free media in Afghanistan. The Taliban have been responsible for a large part of the casualties of the Afghan journalists. However, the group officially was trying to avoid deliberately targeting media members and journalists. By targeting media men and journalists the Taliban are terrorizing the free press in Afghanistan. This is going to be a major setback for the free press in the country. In

last fifteen years of the conflict, hundreds of journalists have been killed or injured as result of their activities. But it is the first time the Taliban are starting to wage an official and broader war against the media in Afghanistan.

The Taliban and other like-minded groups should be taken accountable by the international community and the major world bodies such as the United Nations over their obligations to the safety and security of the media members. The United Nations should designate such attacks on media as war crimes.

The Taliban must remain committed to safety of journalists providing news of the conflict across the country. Protecting media members is a basic obligation of all parties in the conflicts, and all sides including the militant groups must protect journalists. Most of the civilian casualties in the past fifteen years of the conflict have been attributed to the militant groups. The Taliban must end deliberately targeting the civilian population including members of the media. The UN should remain engaged in talks with the Taliban and other militant groups over protection of the civilians. Targeting civilians and media members is a gross violation of the Taliban's official policy as well as their war obligations.

The government needs to do more to safeguard freedom of expression and protect media members reporting the war. Another round of peace negotiations is expected to get underway in a near future after the recent quadrilateral coordination meetings in Kabul and Islamabad.

The government and other members of the quadrilateral coordination group should raise safety of the civilian and the media members as a key issue of talks in the negotiations. The government and other countries involved in the process should exert pressures over the Taliban to ensure the safety of civilian and journalists. As Ashraf Ghani stressed on the wake of the attack, the government need to protect freedom of expressions as a non-negotiable universal value enshrined in the Afghan constitution. As the militants are not tolerating free speech and freedom of expressions in the country, they will raise the matter for negotiations in the peace process. But it is the obligation of the Afghan government to protect the hard-gained achievements of the past fifteen years.

As the upcoming Taliban seasonal campaign is looming, Taliban would probably further step up targeting members of the media in Afghanistan.

The current environment would further deteriorate for the free press in Afghanistan with the deteriorating armed conflict in the country. Civil and media organizations need to step up campaigns for safety and security of journalists and other media members along with more concerted efforts for promoting freedom of expression. These organizations should do more in reaching out to the international community and world bodies for safety and security of journalists in Afghanistan.

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## The Key to a Syrian Accord

By Kenneth Roth

The Syrian peace talks that are scheduled to resume in Geneva on January 25 will take place under a framework set out in Vienna in October. These principles, agreed upon by the most important foreign players in Syria's war, include a commitment to secular governance, the eventual defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS) and other terrorist groups, the maintenance of Syria's prewar borders, the preservation of its state institutions, and the protection of minority groups. What they do not include is an effort to address the largest obstacle to lasting peace: the ongoing attacks against civilians and other atrocities that are intensifying divisions among the Syrian factions who will eventually have to govern together. If the deliberate carnage does not stop soon, diplomacy alone will be unlikely to suffice to end the conflict.

The war has continued for so long, in part, because both the Syrian government and the armed groups it is fighting believed that they would ultimately prevail. Russia's entry into the conflict has helped change that calculus. But, while Russian airpower has bolstered the government enough to keep it from collapsing, it has not been enough to make significant progress against the opposition.

Meanwhile, the attacks in Europe by ISIS, combined with the mass exodus of Syrian refugees, has spurred a new push for a political compromise. The European Union, the United States, and other interested countries hope that Syria's warring parties will stop fighting each other, and turn their weapons instead on ISIS and other extremist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra.

One of the toughest nuts to crack in the peace negotiations is the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his henchmen. The Assad regime is responsible for the highest number of civilian casualties by far, having carried out indiscriminate attacks in populated opposition-held areas, besieged entire populations, blocked the delivery of humanitarian aid, and tortured and executed prisoners.

And yet, while Assad's opponents insist that he relinquish power, that clearly will not be a precondition for the talks. As a practical matter, Assad leads one of the conflict's most powerful factions, one that must be represented at the negotiating table if peace is to be achieved.

Furthermore, the abrupt removal of Assad could deal a fatal blow to the Syrian state - an outcome that is in no one's interest (with the exception of ISIS and other extremists). The dissolution of Syria's security forces and judicial system could be especially dangerous for Syria's minorities. That is why a managed transition must be the goal of all participants in the talks.

One logical compromise would be for Assad to retain power for a short period. Even Russia and Iran, his most vociferous supporters,

have hinted that they could accept his departure if he steps down through negotiations, rather than being ousted by a popular revolt (and as long as the successor regime is friendly to them).

If Assad and his murderous cronies agree to relinquish power, they will undoubtedly seek amnesty for their crimes. That must be firmly rejected. Since the early 1990s, the international community has rightly withheld its imprimatur from amnesties for mass atrocities. Indeed, international law requires that such proposals be rejected.

In any case, an amnesty in Syria would not protect Assad from prosecution. If a future Syrian government were to join the International Criminal Court and consent to retroactive jurisdiction, the court would be free to prosecute any mass atrocities it saw fit to investigate. Similarly, foreign courts exercising universal jurisdiction over alleged Syrian war criminals found on their territory would be free to ignore an amnesty. And precedents from Argentina, Chile, and Peru have shown how even in countries where the atrocities occurred, amnesties granted under pressure of violence can be ruled invalid.

Of course, it would not be realistic to expect Assad and his henchmen to deliver themselves directly to prosecutors in The Hague. They are more likely to use their power in Syria to shield themselves and, if weakened, flee to Moscow or Tehran, delaying efforts to apprehend them.

In the meantime, negotiators face the difficult question of who should replace Assad. According to the Vienna declaration, that question would ultimately be decided by UN-supervised elections. But credible elections in war-torn Syria, where millions have been displaced, will take much time and preparation to organize.

In the meantime, it will be necessary to establish a coalition government by agreement. The Vienna declaration calls for "credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance." In practice, this will mean choosing political figures who have credibility among both Syria's Sunni majority and the Alawite and other minorities whose members have largely turned to Assad for protection.

The international community could facilitate agreement by insisting on the exclusion of people from any side who, through a fair, open, and contested process, are found responsible for serious abuses. Achieving an accord along such lines depends on developing a level of trust among Syria's warring factions that is currently lacking. It is difficult to shake hands with opponents who are killing one's families and neighbors.

That is why US Secretary of State John Kerry is wrong to prioritize striking a deal over ending atrocities. Stopping the deliberate slaughter of civilians is not a byproduct of a peace deal, but a prerequisite for successful negotiations. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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