

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

Daily
Outlook
AFGHANISTAN
The Leading Independent Newspaper

July 02, 2018

Government's Unilateral Truce Ends Amid Heavy Clashes

President Ashraf Ghani has announced a formal end to the government's ceasefire with the Taliban but called on the Taliban militants to agree to full peace talks following a three-day truce during this month's Eid holiday. "It is now the Taliban's decision, whether they want to keep killing or join the peace process," Ghani told a news conference where he repeated an appeal for comprehensive peace talks. He had ordered government forces to suspend offensive operations for 10 days after the Eid truce on June 15-17, which saw unarmed Taliban fighters mingling with soldiers, police and civilians on the streets of Kabul and elsewhere. The truces did not extend to the Daesh terrorist group, which has a relatively small but potent presence in Afghanistan, and launched several deadly attacks on ceasefire revelers during Eid al-Fitr.

Ghani said the ceasefire, which lasted 18 days after it was extended once and overlapped with the Taliban's unilateral three-day truce at the end of the holy month of Ramadan, had been "98 percent successful". The three days of no fighting were unprecedented in the nearly 17-year conflict and triggered jubilant scenes across the war-torn country. It saw unarmed Taliban militants mingling with government troops, police and civilians on the streets of Kabul and elsewhere. Ghani said the ceasefire had shown that the majority of the insurgents wanted peace and it was the "Taliban's turn to give a positive response". "I am ready to extend the ceasefire anytime when the Taliban are ready," he said at the press conference.

The president added, Afghanistan's domestic issues have three dimensions, including government, Taliban, and the nation. He said the nation demands peace and an end to the conflict and the government has positively responded to the demands, emphasizing it is the time that the Taliban should also respond positively. President Ghani said the Taliban group is facing the nation, religious scholars of the country as well as Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Imams and the clerics of the Islamic world. He said the demands for peace come from the nation, religious scholars, and women. The Ulema present the holy Koran and the nation present their children, and it is the time that Taliban should decide whether they will kill the nation or respond positively to their demands.

While regional neighbors, international partners, religious scholars and Afghan civil movements had all called for peace, the Taliban have already rejected talks and fierce fighting has been underway in many parts of Afghanistan ever since the end of Eid. Ignoring the peace movements, Ulema Fatwa and people's demand for peace, they have martyred dozens of Afghan security forces members throughout the country. This shows that their commitment to Islam and their national interest is less stronger than the commitment they have with their steering supporters.

Simultaneously, the president informed of an agreement with Pakistan - in writing - on rooting out terrorism. Addressing an event in Kabul, the president said achievements had been made with Pakistan on finding a solution to the Taliban problem in Afghanistan. "The issue of Taliban should be solved in our relations with Pakistan. Some things have been done in this respect and some things are still needed to be done. It has been agreed on paper for the first time. The Afghanistan-Pakistan negotiations framework is now on paper. Now, serious actions are required," he said. He said there have been improvements in terms of uprooting terrorism. Ghani did not, however, give details on exactly what the new agreement entails.

Meanwhile, a peace convoy just has arrived in Kabul from Kunar province calling Afghans to raise their voice against long term war in the country. This is the second peace convoy who have arrived in Kabul this month, after the Helmand group's arrival 13 days ago. The Kunar activists, who started their walk to Kabul on Monday, are currently in Kabul's Chaman-e-Hozoori area. As quoted from members of the convoy said they walked to Kabul in support of peace efforts that were recently launched around the country. The peace activists urged Kabul residents to join them and raise their voices against the war. "In the past four decades, people suffered a lot. Now due to war we are a backward nation," Mufti Mohammad Bilal, a religious scholar and a member of the convoy said.

These indicate that Afghans are extremely tired and angry due to endless war and rising numbers of suicide bombings and attacks, especially in recent years. The frequent tragedies and death bodies which are usually broadcasted through media can badly affect over the psychology of the people, especially the students, teachers and economic workers are severely demotivated throughout the country. When any event occurs the residents are largely following the news through TV or their hand set mobile while the children, teenagers, elders, women, girls and all witness insecurity and painful events which resulted to live in fear of the next attack. According to a report, there are 600,000 widows and many more orphans who lost their caretakers as a result of continuous war.

Therefore, it is highly expected from all warring sides not to pour cold water on hopes of Afghan people seeking their interests in peace, not war; especially Taliban are highly expected to respect the Ulema consensus and peoples demand for the sake of their own nation. Thus, international partners are also expected to act upon the strategic agreements and be honest in seeking peace if they really want to be friends with Afghan people. Finally, the Afghan government is expected to realize that reconciliation with terrorist groups should be handled from the position of strength, and not from the position of appeasement and weakness. In addition to being active in diplomatic approaches, we must prove our success in the battle field, as well.



Afghan Government Ceasefire Initiative Should Encompass Security, Peace & Development Strategy

By Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

Recent ceasefire may be followed by trustworthy peace process monitoring mechanism supplemented with confidence building and trust building measures, all under overall security, peace and development strategy. In response to President Ghani's announcement on 7th June for a temporary unconditional ceasefire with Taliban until June 20, coinciding with the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, Eid, Taliban responded to observe a ceasefire for three days coinciding with the end of the Eid month. For the first time since their overthrow in 2001, Taliban responded. Taliban ceasefire ended on 17th June mid night. The Government extended the ceasefire period for ten days more. But, Taliban did not extend and announced start of new operation. Both parties overlapped ceasefire for a brief period of three days but it had great significance. It is unprecedented and rightly so, it is welcome by all, the United Nations, the US administration, the government of Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan.

During the ceasefire, Taliban members visited the Government controlled areas and other way round, where people visited Taliban areas. They flocked to provincial cities including Kabul. Their weapons were collected at the government check posts and so they were unarmed. Some were reported of having weapons. They were noticed exchanging Eid pleasantries and hugging Afghan security and police personnel. Minister of Interior Barmak also reportedly met Taliban groups on second day of Eid, Saturday, at roadside in the outskirts of Kabul. Many of Taliban wore traditional headgear, some hid their faces, board on vehicles and motorbikes. They had their flags. The Taliban urged people to come forward and take selfies. Some people were dancing and clapping as onlookers took photos. There was euphoria and optimism everywhere. Peace prevailed everywhere except in Nangarhar province where in two separate incidents on 16th and 17th June - the second and third day of three days period, at least 50 persons killed and 110 injured. Both are suspected to be carried out by Islamic State. The country was never so peaceful in the last few years as it was during the ceasefire. There are at least 21 international terrorist groups operating in the country and still ceasefire was respected by all. It gives hope to people of Afghanistan that they can bring back peace and they can move on the path leading to peace, stability and development.

Ceasefire offers were carefully crafted by both, the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, with their respective caveats. The Afghan security forces will continue to "stop offensive maneuvers against Afghan armed Taliban and will continue to target Daesh [IS] and other foreign-backed terrorist organizations and their affiliates". The US state department said the ceasefire does not "prohibit operations to defend Afghan and Coalition forces from attack". Taliban also said that the foreign forces would be excluded from the ceasefire, and operations against them would continue. They would defend themselves against any attack.

In the country where 21 identified terrorist organizations operate and cross connection among them cannot be ruled out, the violence during the Ramadan

month did not cease fully. On 09th June, on one day itself 65 security personnel had been killed in three attacks. There was an escalation in attacks before three days ceasefire started. These were either strategic tactics or maneuvered attacks under caveats, but these should not deter the peace efforts which were initiated by the Government and responded by Taliban. These efforts were also supplemented by few confidence building measures, including the release of prisoners and detainees and visits of families. One hundred and eighty four prisoners affiliated with the Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) were released from prisoners on 14th June, Thursday, which was followed by the release of fifty four Taliban prisoners by Government as goodwill gesture.

Turning out of Taliban leaders, although middle level leaders, was a surprise for all. It was welcome by people and government security forces, like home coming after a prolong exile. Taliban groups have military strategy and political strategy and even during Eid visits, they were with their flags to get political and ideological mileage. They left weapons behind but not the flags. They demonstrated their distinct identity and possibly its acceptability among Afghans. People driven peace initiatives have started in the country but still at nascent stage. It is a beginning of an era where people are fed up of violence and they have started seeking peace. A group of 8 Helmand Peace Convoy activists started from Helmand on 12th May and walked over 630 kms to Kabul spreading a message of peace in Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul and Ghazni provinces. Most of them are victims of war and they are of all ages, 17 to 65. The group enlarged to more than 30 en-route. After walking for 38 days, they reached Kabul on 17th June, chanting slogans of 'stop the war' and 'we want peace'. Everyone in Afghanistan wants peace: the government, the people and the Taliban. Recent truce is a sign that Taliban may look for a political solution. If they make their intention unequivocal then it should be pro-actively facilitated through confidence building and trust building measures, so that there is win-win situation for all. Towards these, we need a trustworthy peace process monitoring mechanism, including ceasefires so that violations, if any, can be investigated quickly to identify the perpetrators isolating Taliban from terrorist organizations and identify cross connections. Same time, the mechanism will keep a check on both, the Taliban and the Government.

South Asia strategy of United States may work if it can engage more regional actors in economic development, peace process and counter insurgency operations. Engagement of UAE and Qatar is worth of appreciation. More countries are to be engaged. It will develop political consensus in the region to strike off support to Taliban, which will put more pressure on Taliban to explore non-military solutions. Economic development, peace process and counter insurgency all have to go hand in hand together. Counter insurgency operations should have better defined objectivity to the start of peace process which include aspects of accountability, reconciliation and rehabilitation and these are to be integrated to development activities.

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The Middle East: History threatens to repeat itself

By James M. Dorsey

If the notion that history repeats itself is accurate, it is nowhere truer than in the Middle East where the international community, caught by surprise by the 2011 popular Arab revolts, has reverted to opting for political stability as opposed to sustainability, ignoring the undercurrents of change wracking the Middle East. Major powers do so at their peril.

The failure of the United States, Europe, China and Russia to recognize key drivers of fundamental societal change and revisit the underpinnings of their policies towards the Middle East and beyond threatens to nullify professed aims of wanting to end bloodshed, curb extremism, stabilize the region and protect their interests.

In a just published study, Jose Antonio Sabadell, a former Spanish and European Union diplomat, argues that the narrow focus of the West, and by extension of China and Russia, on countering extremism, stemming the flood of refugees, and securing economic interests, blinds major powers from recognizing tectonic social and political shifts that are likely to reshape a region embroiled in volatile, often violent transition.

Without saying so explicitly, Mr. Sabadell harks back more than a decade to the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when Western leaders, including then US President George W. Bush recognized that Western support for Middle Eastern autocracy that failed to address widespread popular grievances and perceptions of Western policy had created the feeding ground for jihadist groups focused on striking at Western targets.

That recognition produced an expectation that the Arab street would assert itself, neutralize breeding grounds of extremism, and counter radicalism by pushing for political and economic change.

When the Arab street did not immediately revolt, government officials, analysts and journalists wrote it off. The widespread discontent continued to simmer at the surface. It was palpable if one put one's ear to the ground and finally exploded a decade later in 2011.

That pattern hasn't changed despite a brutal counterrevolution that reversed the achievements of the revolt in Egypt and produced civil and covert wars and/or overt military interventions in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Just how little has changed is evident in the continued validity of Egyptian-born political scientist Nazih Ayubi's assertion 22 years ago that the Arab world is populated by hard rather than strong states whose power is rooted in bureaucracies, militaries and security forces.

Mr. Ayubi noted that these states were "lamentably feeble when it comes to collecting taxes, winning wars or forging a really 'hegemonic' power bloc or an ideology that can carry the state beyond the coercive and 'corporate' level and into the moral and intellectual sphere."

Recent protests, often innovative in their manifestations, in Morocco, Egypt and Iran prove the point.

"The Arab world is in the middle of a process of deep social and political change... The emergence of Arab peoples as key political actors, in combination with widespread, profound and mounting popular frustration, is a game changer. What Arab populations think and crucially how they feel, will determine the future evolution of their countries," Mr. Sabadell predicted.

Historical record backs up his assertion that fundamental change is a process rather than an event. The era of the 2011 revolts and their counterrevolutionary aftermath may be reminiscent of the 1789 French revolutionary wave that was countered by powerful conservative forces that ultimately failed to avert the 1848 revolution.

A renewed failure to recognize the social psychological, emotional, social, economic and political underpinnings of simmering discontent suggests that the international community's focus on migration and extremism could boomerang by further antagonizing significant sectors of societies in a swath of land that stretches from Africa to China.

It is likely to impact stability in a region that borders on Europe, constitutes Russia's backyard and soft underbelly and stretches into China's strategic north-western province of Xinjiang. It also risks fuelling rather than countering extremism that feeds on its understanding and exploitation of the emotions, social psychology and identity politics of deep-seated grievances.

"We are at a crossroads... Vital interests are at stake... These developments will define... interaction with 400 million people living in Europe's immediate neighbourhood, and shape relations with the wider Middle East and North Af-

rica region... This can have profound geopolitical implications, influence the global scenario for the foreseeable future and maybe change the nature of international politics," Mr. Sabadell said.

Democratization of Islam in the West and major Asian nations as well as political Islam that is encouraged by autocrats in countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates despite the fact that religion is often the only permissible language in public discourse, and Islamophobia, magnify the risk and exacerbate the problem.

The centrality of Islam in Middle Eastern identity coupled with widespread anti-Western sentiment that is reinforced by the Trump administration's immigration policy and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe strengthens a belief that the West, and eventually China with its repressive policy in Xinjiang, is hostile to Islam. It's a belief that hands opportunity to extremists on a silver platter.

It is also a belief that intrinsically links social and economic grievances with perceived threats to collective national, regional and religious identities, a pillar of populism on both sides of the Atlantic as well as the Mediterranean in what Indian essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra dubbed "the flourishing international economy of disaffection."

The key popular demand for dignity that characterized the 2011 revolts as well as subsequent protests related as much to calls for clean, non-corrupt governance and efficient delivery of public goods and services as it did for acknowledgement of a proper place for Arab and Muslim states in the international system. A key issue that world powers turn a blind eye to is the fact that even if religion constitutes the bedrock of autocratic legitimacy and frames public discourse, religiosity is in flux with youth increasingly embracing the notion that faith is a private affair rather than a ritualistic adherence to laws and a set of ineluctable beliefs.

Closely related is the failure to realize that the gap between the Middle East and the West and potentially with China and Russia is not one that is rooted in values but in policies.

As a result, anti-immigrant sentiment coupled with Islamophobia, reducing the Middle East to concerns of migration and extremism, support for autocratic regimes, indifference towards the worsening plights of huge population groups, and the lack of even-handed policies towards key conflicts like Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute threatens to turn the fictional value gap into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is a prophecy that is exploited by extremists who unlike world powers understand the power of and beneficial focus on emotions.

The self-fulfilling prophecy is underwritten by decades of failed policy in which military interventions, debilitating attempts at regime change, misconceived notions of nation building and misconstrued calls for reform of Islam have fuelled mayhem and crisis.

"What the Arab world may need is not a religious leader but rather a social leader; not someone who wants to reform religion, but who wants to reform society... one who uses the popular legitimacy and the authority of religion to promote social and political change. Islam may need a Martin Luther King Jr. more than a Martin Luther," Mr. Sabadell said.

Stopping failed policies from cementing false perceptions in a self-fulfilling prophecy will take more than counter narratives, political messaging and promotion of 'moderate' Islam. It will require fundamentally revisiting the notion that support for self-serving autocrats whose policies contribute to the threat of the prophecy is part of the solution.

The crisis in the Middle East offers the West a historic opportunity in the far larger struggle with China and Russia for a future international order. It is where the West has a strategic advantage that it can exploit if it is capable of dropping its horse claps that allow it to see primarily only the threats of migration and extremism.

Said Mr. Sabadell: "The way the West handles its relations with the region can and should make a significant difference. What it does and says will be the key; what it does not do and does not say will be equally important. How it acts, or not, and speaks up or remains silent will define its position and determine its effectiveness."

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