

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

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Taliban's Engagement in Civilian Casualties Outrages Public Conscience

The indiscriminate attacks and suicide bombings, including Monday bombing in the heart of Kabul which killed and wounded dozens of civilians, carried out by the Taliban have filled the air with strong hatred. Afghans also lost their trust in meaningful peace talks, ongoing between the Taliban and the US representatives in Qatar's capital.

Afghan civilians, including women and children, have sustained heavy casualties within the last few years as a result of the Taliban's intensified attacks. According to the UN figure, civilian casualties jumped by 11 percent from 2017 with 3,804 people killed, including 927 children, and another 7,189 wounded. The last year surge in violence coincided with a significant increase in the number of deaths caused by the "deliberate targeting of civilians", based on the UN report.

Anti-government armed groups, mainly the Taliban and ISIS group, accounted for 63 percent of the casualties, the report said.

The Taliban have been involved in systematic killings of civilians. They carried out indiscriminate attacks across the country to put pressure on the government. They have frequently violated the humanitarian law and the Islamic tenets.

The Monday attack suggests two facts: First, the Taliban still target civilians without an iota of mercy and brazenly claim responsibility for attacks which result in heavy civilian casualties. They resort to targeting civilians whenever losing the war in the battlefield. Second, it shows the Taliban's foul play at the negotiating table. Despite the ongoing peace talks, the Taliban have intensified their attacks and declared their spring offensive. They also turned down the demand of Loya Jirga, grand council, representatives for ceasefire and holding direct talks with the Kabul government.

On the one hand, the engagement of the Taliban's political office in the negotiation and, on the other hand, the organization of deadly attacks by the Taliban's military commanders show a gap between the Taliban's political leadership and their rank and file. Perhaps the Taliban militants seek to sabotage the peace talks and push their leadership not to declare ceasefire.

Both the Taliban ideologues and mercenaries are most likely to push for violence and militancy. That is, they follow their ideology and economic interests through insurgency.

The Monday's deadly attack in Kabul also leads to a speculation that the Taliban have always sought to disrupt friendly relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whenever the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan start to thaw, the Taliban carry out massive attacks to trigger the blame game between the two countries. The Taliban military leadership would be the main whistle-blower. It is because if Pakistan uses her leverage, she would be able to push the Taliban to reach a peaceful agreement at the peace table. Few days back, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan vowed to support "Afghan-led" and "Afghan-owned" peace talks. Afghan-Pak leaders reaffirmed their commitment to playing their role responsibly in terms of regional peace and stability. Hence, the relations between the two sides have been cemented in the wake of President Ghani's state visit to Pakistan. But the Taliban would find their interests at stake with an Afghan-Pak strong tie.

With this in mind, Afghan-Pak officials have to be cautious not to resume their harsh rhetoric against each other as a result of the Taliban's suicide bombings. Instead, the two sides have to put much pressure on the Taliban either to declare ceasefire or have to face the consequences.

It should be noted that Pakistani officials have constantly said that dialogue, not military deal, would be the only viable option to end the conflict. But despite the seventh round of peace talks ongoing between the Taliban and the US negotiators, peace and stability remain elusive. If the Taliban continue their insurgency, the Kabul government would also adopt the tit-for-tat policy. Hence, Islamabad should nudge the Taliban to capitalize on the current opportunity and reach an agreement with their interlocutors.

The fear of failure in peace talks emerge among the public in recent days. If the ongoing peace talks reach a stalemate, militancy would be multiplied in Afghanistan, which would have a huge bearing on regional stability. In such a case, the Afghan government and its international allies would intensify their attacks against the Taliban network and would target them even outside the Afghan soil.

The Taliban have to stop the foul play at the peace table and stop targeting civilians. In short, spilling the blood of civilians would only increase public hatred against the Taliban.

Thumbs Down to Facebook's Cryptocurrency

By: Joseph E. Stiglitz

Facebook and some of its corporate allies have decided that what the world really needs is another cryptocurrency, and that launching one is the best way to use the vast talents at their disposal. The fact that Facebook thinks so reveals much about what is wrong with twenty-first-century American capitalism.

In some ways, it's a curious time to be launching an alternative currency. In the past, the main complaint about traditional currencies was their instability, with rapid and uncertain inflation making them a poor store of value. But the dollar, the euro, the yen, and the renminbi have all been remarkably stable. If anything, the worry today is about deflation, not inflation.

The world has also made progress on financial transparency, making it more difficult for the banking system to be used to launder money and for other nefarious activities. And technology has enabled us to complete transactions efficiently, moving money from customers' accounts into those of retailers in nanoseconds, with remarkably good fraud protection. The last thing we need is a new vehicle for nurturing illicit activities and laundering the proceeds, which another cryptocurrency will almost certainly turn out to be.

The real problem with our existing currencies and financial arrangements, which serve as a means of payment as well as a store of value, is the lack of competition among and regulation of the companies that control transactions. As a result, consumers – especially in the United States – pay a multiple of what payments should cost, lining the pockets of Visa, Mastercard, American Express, and banks with tens of billions of dollars of "rents" – excessive profits – every year. The Durbin Amendment to the 2010 Dodd-Frank financial-reform legislation curbs the excessive fees charged for debit cards only to a very limited extent, and it did nothing about the much bigger problem of excessive fees associated with credit cards.

Other countries, like Australia, have done a much better job, including by forbidding credit card companies from using contractual provisions to restrain competition, whereas the US Supreme Court, in another of its 5-4 decisions, seemed to turn a blind eye to such provisions' anti-competitive effects. But even if the US decides to have a non-competitive second-rate financial system, Europe and the rest of the world should say no: it is not anti-American to be pro-competition, as Trump seems to have recently suggested in his criticism of European Commissioner for Competition Margrethe Vestager.

One might well ask: What is Facebook's business model, and why do so many seem so interested in its new venture? It could be that they want a cut of the rents accruing to the platforms through which transactions are processed. The fact that they believe that more competition won't drive down profits to near zero attests to the corporate sector's confidence in its ability to wield market power – and in its political power to ensure that government won't intervene to curb these excesses.

With the US Supreme Court's renewed commitment to undermining American democracy, Facebook and its friends might think they have little to fear. But regulators, entrusted not just with maintaining stabil-

ity, but also with ensuring competition in the financial sector, should step in. And elsewhere in the world, there is less enthusiasm for America's tech dominance with its anticompetitive practices.

Supposedly, the new Libra currency's value will be fixed in terms of a global basket of currencies and 100% backed – presumably by a mix of government treasuries. So here's another possible source of revenue: paying no interest on "deposits" (traditional currencies exchanged for Libra). Facebook can reap an arbitrage profit from the interest it receives on those "deposits." But why would anyone give Facebook a zero-interest deposit, when they could put their money in an even safer US Treasury bill, or in a money-market fund? (The recording of capital gains and losses each time a transaction occurs, as the Libra is converted back into local currency, and the taxes due seem to be an important impediment, unless Facebook believes it can ride roughshod over our tax system, as it has over privacy and competition concerns.) There are two obvious answers to the question of the business model: one is that people who engage in nefarious activities (possibly including America's current president) are willing to pay a pretty penny to have their nefarious activities – corruption, tax avoidance, drug dealing, or terrorism – go undetected. But, having made so much progress in impeding the use of the financial system to facilitate crime, why would anyone – let alone the government or financial regulators – condone such a tool simply because it bears the label "tech"?

If this is Libra's business model, governments should shut it down immediately. At the very least, Libra should be subject to the same transparency regulations that apply to the rest of the financial sector. But then it wouldn't be a cryptocurrency.

Alternatively, the data Libra transactions provide could be mined, like all the other data that's come into Facebook's possession – reinforcing its market power and profits, and further undermining our security and privacy. Facebook (or Libra) might promise not to do that, but who would believe it?

Then there is the broader question of trust. Every currency is based on confidence that the hard-earned "deposited" into it will be redeemable on demand. The private banking sector has long shown that it is untrustworthy in this respect, which is why new prudential regulations have been necessary.

But, in just a few short years, Facebook has earned a level of distrust that took the banking sector much longer to achieve. Time and again, Facebook's leaders, faced with a choice between money and honoring their promises, have grabbed the money. And nothing could be more about money than creating a new currency. Only a fool would trust Facebook with his or her financial wellbeing. But maybe that's the point: with so much personal data on some 2.4 billion monthly active users, who knows better than Facebook just how many suckers are born every minute?

Joseph E. Stiglitz, University Professor at Columbia University, is the co-winner of the 2001 Nobel Memorial Prize, former chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, and former Chief Economist of the World Bank. His most recent book is *People, Power, and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent*.

Safeguarding Health in a Warming World

By: Seth Berkley

From infrastructure damage caused by extreme weather events to drought-induced food insecurity, there are many climate risks for which the world should urgently be preparing. But one of the areas where climate change poses arguably the most significant risk is barely being discussed: human health.

When natural disasters strike, the death toll from floods, famines, or building collapses is often just the beginning; the sickness and disease that follow sometimes do far more damage. As global temperatures and sea levels continue to rise, so, too, does the frequency and intensity of natural disasters and, with them, the risk of deadly epidemics and endemic disease outbreaks.

That risk was underscored recently in Mozambique, where Cyclone Idai, which struck in March, has led to a cholera epidemic, with more than 6,700 suspected cases reported so far. As for oft-ignored endemic disease risks, a year after floods devastated Pakistan in 2010, there were 37 million reported cases of malaria, diarrhea, and acute respiratory and skin infections. Similarly, in the Solomon Islands, flooding in the capital caused by a 2014 tropical storm led to an outbreak of diarrheal disease, which spread to five districts that had not been affected by the flooding.

A resilient primary health-care system is the best defense against such devastation. Yet it occupies little space on the climate agenda. This is a serious shortcoming, because health systems tend to be particularly vulnerable to environmental shocks, whether climate-related or otherwise. According to a recent World Health Organization study, 84% of 94 countries assessed are not prepared to detect and respond to a disease outbreak.

Beyond compromising immediate disaster response, failure to build resilience into health-care systems undermines the long-term delivery of basic health interventions, exacerbating the vulnerability of the system – and of the population it serves. In many cases, those who are likely to suffer the most severe consequences of climate change – such as the poor – have the least access to reliable and effective primary health care, including even the most basic services.

As climate change continues, the consequences of such weaknesses will worsen. And they will be compounded by other global trends, beginning with urbanization.

By 2050, two-thirds of the world's population is expected to be living in urban areas – 2.5 billion more people than today. Such rapid

urbanization – partly driven by factors like poverty, conflict, and, indeed, climate change – will aggravate the risk of both epidemics and endemic disease. Higher population density facilitates contagion, while increased pollution and pressure on public sanitation can lead to respiratory disease (such as pneumonia) and diarrheal disease (like rotavirus and cholera).

It is not just poor countries that need to worry. In the coming decades, rising temperatures are expected to accelerate the return of disease vectors, such as the Aedes aegypti mosquito, to parts of Europe and North America, and even cause them to spread to new regions as far north as Canada. This could lead to a resurgence of yellow fever, which was once pervasive in the United States and parts of Europe, and outbreaks of dengue fever and Zika virus. Based on Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change data the combination of climate change and population growth is predicted to put an additional 6 billion people at risk of dengue infection by 2080.

Without effective primary health care, the response to shocks will always be reactive, costly, and inefficient. Fortunately, there is already a system in place that can facilitate the delivery of the necessary level of care.

That system is the one that has ensured that immunization reaches more people than any other health intervention. More than 80% of children worldwide – including many in the world's poorest countries and most challenging settings – now have access to routine vaccinations, which protect them against diseases like diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis.

The immunization system – which, to be sure, should be expanded to reach all children – can serve as a foundation on which to build primary health care. With community relationships, supply chains, trained staff, data monitoring, disease surveillance, and health records already in place, it becomes far easier to deliver other health interventions that can benefit both individuals and the wider community, such as nutritional supplements and malaria-prevention programs.

Even if the world manages to prevent the average global temperature from rising more than 2° Celsius above pre-industrial levels, we will need to brace ourselves for a dramatic increase in climate-related health emergencies. The expansion and strengthening of primary health care is an effective – and cost-effective – means of building resilience against the challenges that await us.

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