

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



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Taliban's Refusal of the Peace Plan

Taliban's refusal to take part in the anticipated peace talks in Islamabad indicates the complexity and difficulty of a process that is supposed to end a long-lasting bloody conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban announced on Saturday it would not participate in the peace talks brokered by the four-nation group unless its preconditions are met. In a statement released by a Taliban spokesman, the group has insisted on its repeatedly-stated preconditions such as withdrawal of foreign forces, release of Taliban prisoners and removing names of Taliban members from UN blacklist.

Despite the broad expectations for start of direct peace negotiations in the timeframe set by the four-nation group, the Taliban refusal to participate in the talks is quite understandable. It should not be coming as surprising as peace negotiations are generally complicated and often face challenges. The peace efforts in Afghanistan have been particularly intricate and have been pursued in through a wrong approach. Even the ongoing four-nation peace initiative has had its shortcomings and was established based on wishful procedures and timeframe. The initiative has been largely praised for establishing a mechanism for cooperation among some key states to help in bringing peace in Afghanistan. However, it seems to have made mistakes in the very first place by unilaterally setting a timeframe for resumption of peace negotiations.

No need to mention that any peace initiative not meeting the requirements for start of negotiations will face deadlocks. The four-nation initiative has been and will be the right establishment for paving the way for direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, the process will require excruciating back-channel talks in the first place to pursue Taliban to come to the table of negotiations. This should have been done before setting a date and venue for face-to-face talks and making the plan public. Such challenges are expected even through a more viable and pragmatic process. Both the Taliban and the four-nation group will not consider the Taliban's refusal to take part in the talks as the end of the process.

The deadlock at the very starting phase of the initiative suggests the intricacy and difficulty of peace talks with the militant groups. It is a known fact that Pakistan does not have ultimate influence over the various Afghan militant groups whose leaders are residing in the country. However, the Taliban's refusal to send a representative for first face-to-face talks suggest that Islamabad may also have limited influence over the main Taliban group, led by Taliban leader Mullah Mansoor. Pakistan's influence over the Taliban would only work if used through a right mechanism and ensuring that Islamabad would use force if the Taliban does not join peace talks.

However, it is unclear yet whether Pakistan would take serious action against the militant leaders if they continue to refuse to negotiate with the government of Afghanistan. It is going to put Pakistan's resolve into test if the Taliban continue to reject the peace plan set up by the four-nation group.

This depends whether Pakistan has a genuine will for helping the peace efforts in Afghanistan. From another perspective, the Taliban's refusal to come to the talks may serve Pakistan's stance on the Afghan peace efforts. Pakistan has long been insisting it has no absolute influence over the militant groups. The recent move by the Taliban corroborates the claim, and could be used by Islamabad in the course of possible peace talks in the future.

The move by the Taliban is calculated and serves the group's interests in the war and peace developments in the country. The militants feel to be in an upper position in the war against the government. The Taliban seem to be using the tactic of time-buying aimed at both frustrating the government of Afghanistan and waiting for another season of fighting to wage violence. The Taliban know well that time is racing against the government's interests and in favor of the militants. The next summer fighting will likely further cement Taliban's military gains achieved last year. This is while the Afghan government is negotiating from a weaker stance as it has failed to exert sufficient military pressures on the militant groups. Even the Taliban agree in the future to take part in the talks, there will delays on the side of the militant groups as it would serve its interests in both the peace politics and on the battleground.

The initial failure to pursue Taliban into coming to the table of negotiations does not mean that the Taliban will not join peace talks. Ahead of the disclosure of the death of Taliban founder Mullah Omar last year and the split that followed, the Taliban hinted readiness for peace negotiations with the Afghan government. The Taliban may come back at some point in the future but it would take more time and efforts and provision of concessions to them. The government of Afghanistan may find it inevitable to consider concessions for the militants such as release of prisoners and removal of Taliban names from UN terror blacklist.

Taliban's refusal to attend talks with no doubt would further complicate the peace process and leave it susceptible to other surprise disruptions caused by adverse military and political developments such as eruption of a new wave of insurgency and possible deterioration of relations between Kabul and Islamabad.

A Literary Way of Looking at the World

By Dilawar Sherzai

There are different ways of looking at the life, world and the universe as whole. Some see in it a perfect harmony; others find chaos and disturbance. Some believe it to be the outcome of strife and struggle; while others sense it to be a source of enjoyment and bliss. Few run after responsibility and duties; some others live as if they are living the last days of their lives, forgetting all the responsibilities of their lives. The ways people look at the universe is undoubtedly innumerable and at the same time there are different ways the people express about the universe and their own feelings about different phenomena in it. Some try to express through mathematical formulae; while others develop scientific theories. Some create political order and political discourse; while others express through the verses of religion. And, there are few others who express through the bewitching tool of literature. Whatever may be the tool, everyone who expresses, wants to express in the best possible manner in order to get the attention of the maximum number of the people. Literature, however, is the most successful among the tools of expression as it strives to achieve beauty. And, when it is able to achieve beauty and perfection, it faces no difficulty in penetrating deep in the hearts and souls of its audience. Great literary works of the world have proved the fact that the effect generated by them is everlasting and difficult to overlook. They have been written in golden words and most of them have even become the life and blood of different societies. People sing the songs of them and dance on its tune. In fact, they have been subdued by its spells. Literature has played a tremendous role in human life and it will keep on doing so, as far as, human beings are able to treat it with care and importance. Literature is actually a creative capability of human life. And, as human life is always changing, same is the case with literature; and it is also one of the reasons that it has been able to stand successful against the ever changing time. It can never be stagnant and has always changed forms and will keep on doing so. Literature, in fact, is not a mechanical phenomenon and does not act like machine, which after working for some time may stop working and is again brought to work by providing fuel. Literary creativity is actually the outcome of two most important human potentials - thoughts and feelings. As a

matter of fact, by thinking that literature has come to a halt, one has to think that human beings have stopped thinking and feeling, which is not possible. The literary creativity can only stop when human beings stop to exist, but for the time being, human beings are immortal; they have heart and mind and both of them are always in action; therefore, their capability to create would never stop and nor would the literary creativity.

To create a qualitative literature, it is necessary to study human society and the social interactions that take place within the society, along with the philosophical study of different phenomena in life. Social interactions and systems are basically the factors that lay the foundation of a society. We, in addition to the understanding of stars, flowers, beauty, miracles and the aesthetic pleasures for the human spirit, must also understand those aspects of life which are wholly or partly materialistic as literature has to grow from the soil. Though it may grow slowly and reach to the sky but at the end it has to have its roots in the soil.

It is, as a matter of fact, possible to solve the daily problems in our lives through literature. A true literature must reflect the life of common man and at the same time it must play a role in solving the social and spiritual issues in human life and all these responsibilities go to the intellectuals, writers and poets.

If we see the contemporary social and political lives we can find myriads of issues. For example, in our social system there are myriads of injustices. The ruling elite, in order to pursue its own self-centered incentives, is trying to keep the status quo and avoid any sort of positive change. There is corruption, poverty and different types of crimes and all these problems need to be highlighted and at the same time people need to understand them and play their role in solving them. Literature can play a dominant role in identifying and highlighting those issues and let the people know about them. The intellectuals, poets and writers, through their prose, poetry and drama can show the people the difficulties they have been facing because of the injustices and problems in the social and political systems and thus can help them in playing an active role as citizens of a country and members of a society.

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Equal Opportunity to Women Benefits All

By Annette Dixon

Exclusive for the Daily Outlook Afghanistan

As we today mark UN Women's Day, it is worth considering what the inequality between men and women costs South Asian countries and what can be done about it.

One big cost of inequality is that South Asian economies do not reach their full potential. In Bangladesh, for example, women account for most unpaid work, and are overrepresented in the low productivity informal sector and among the poor. Raising the female employment rate could contribute significantly to Bangladesh achieving its goal in 2021 of becoming a middle-income country. Yet even middle-income countries in South Asia could prosper from more women in the workforce. Women represent only 34 percent of the employed population in Sri Lanka, a figure that has remained static for decades. Economic opportunities for women matter not just because they can bring money home. They also matter because opportunities empower women more broadly in society and this can have a positive impact on others. If women have a bigger say in how household money is spent this can ensure more of it is spent on children. Improvements in the education and health of women have been linked to better outcomes for their children in countries as varied as Nepal and Pakistan. In India, giving power to women at the local government level led to increases in public services, such as water and sanitation. Just as the costs of inequality are huge, so is the challenge in overcoming it.

The gaps in opportunity between men and women are the product of pervasive and stubborn social norms that privilege men's and boys' access to opportunities and resources over women's and girls'.

What is therefore required is a sustained, comprehensive drive to end inequality. This will require addressing multiple and reinforcing barriers to equality among families, job and product markets, as well as among formal and informal institutions.

A first step would be to improve the access for girls to education to reduce the in-built disadvantages that they have from birth onwards.

This is recognized by many across South Asia and there has been a lot of progress, with initiatives such as Educate Girls in India tackling the root causes of gender inequality in education.

South Asia has achieved gender parity in primary education and more must be done to narrow the gaps in sec-

ondary education. Pakistan and Afghanistan still have the highest gender disparities in the region in secondary education enrollment rates.

A second step would be to address market and institutional failures that lock women into low return, highly vulnerable forms of employment and of self-employment.

Much can be achieved by encouraging the creation of a large number of jobs that are seen as suitable and safe for women. In Bangladesh, for example, the ready-made garment industry has brought into the labor market large numbers of young women. Studies have shown that this has also resulted in delayed marriage and lower fertility rates among girls. In Nepal, for example, road repair and maintenance after last year's devastating earthquake has been done by female and male work crews. The cleaning of drains, filling pits, clearing minor blockades and planting trees has provided a steady income and the employed women have also gained greater respect in their families and communities, giving them more voice in decision-making. A third step will be to address the violence against women and girls in South Asia. This received worldwide attention recently with the Oscar awarded to Sharmeen Obaid for her documentary on the murder of women in Pakistan.

This violence has a multitude of negative effects, from poor education and health to discouraging women from commuting to better-paid jobs. Many countries have adopted progressive legislation. But many laws are not enforced, the public and law enforcement are largely unaware of them, and structural weaknesses in police and judicial systems deny women access to justice and render laws ineffective.

Remedies will include improved legal systems, institutions, and services.

Specific remedies could include using reproductive health personnel as a way of counseling women suffering this violence. It could also include sensitizing police officers so they no longer stereotype victims, building shelters for abused women, and appointing judges specialized in gender violence issues. Remedies will also require expenditure on infrastructure so that cities are well lit and women are safe on public transport.

No country can reach its full economic potential and achieve widespread prosperity if half its population cannot participate fully in the economy. As we mark Women's Day, it is important to remember that equality for women is to the benefit of all.

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