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March 8 Celebrated with Various Concerns about Women's Rights

International Women's Day is a good opportunity to reflect the progress and call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the country. Availing the opportunity, we need to increase further awareness of gender equality and issues that face local communities including how they could play a greater role in making changes in their own lives and contribute the sustainable development of Afghanistan. This occasion is broadly marked in other parts of the world, especially at the United Nations Headquarters in New York with numerous activities and various personalities committed to the advancement of women's rights.

Generally the situation of women in Afghanistan has gradually improved in the last decade, especially in the major urban areas, but there are still cases which show availability of discrimination and violence. According to a very recent survey carried out by a civil society organization released on last Wednesday, 76 percent of men still use violent behavior against their wives in this country. This study was performed through interviews with 1926 people (78% of women and 28% men) in the provinces of Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Nangarhar and Bamyan. As Mr. Aziz Rafiei, the chairman of this organization was quoted, "75.9% of the interviewees said that they had experienced violence and only 24.1% said they had not; as findings says, Physical violence 20.5%, Social Violence 17.8%, Cultural violence, 11.8% and Economic violence is 16.4%. According to the study, the rate of husband-language violence against their spouses was 25.8% and sexual violence was 5.2%.

Another part of the study focuses on violence against women in the husband's family, which rates this kind of violence up to 66.2% including three main categories such as Physical, sexual and linguistic violence; Mr. Rafiei said the linguistic violence rises to over 39%, which shows low social culture in the families. According to Mr. Rafiei, pre-wedding women in the paternal family also face a variety of violence, as 39.4% of the people involved in the survey confirmed this issue. He added, "Physical violence is 26.8 percent and Sexual violence is one percent, but it's very sad that a young girl does not feel comfortable in her own family, this is very dangerous. If one is not safe in her own family, no other place would be safe for that.

According to the study, the blamable factors consist of paying disrespect to the husbands and husband's family, the unemployment and anger of their husbands due to the country's abnormalities. The civil society organizations have called for public awareness through mosques, schools and the media to reduce violence against women in the family. They also emphasized for police support to protect women's fundamental rights, provide employment, prosecute perpetrators of violence against women and provide women with access to justice.

The other issue which broadly discussed in the media is the status of women in the current peace process. In recent months, Afghan women have repeatedly expressed deep concerns over what they believe women's rights and liberties would be undermined in the peace process with the Taliban who had imposed restrict rules on them when they were in power. They are concerned that Qatar bilateral talks have not yet seriously mentioned anything about status of women in the future. Only in Moscow peace talks, there was a general discussion about women rights that two women had participated in the talks; during the talks, Taliban only said that the women have the right to education and can live in the framework of Islamic laws in the society. This ambiguity has concerned the women community and also shows that the Taliban has not changed intellectually and ideologically, and still has their own strong convictions. Following the debated concerns and reports of violence against women, the United Nations called on the Afghan government to redouble efforts to ensure that "women's voices are heard in public and women are members of key decision-making bodies such as the Supreme Court or holders of senior positions such as governorships or ministerial appointments." "Empowering urban and rural Afghan women is essential to reducing poverty, inequality, and violence against women," said Toby Lanzer, acting head of the UN in Afghanistan. Human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, have voiced concern at women's rights in Afghanistan. In response to the concerns, the Afghanistan's First Lady Rula Ghani assured on Thursday that the Afghan women and their rights will not be compromised in the peace process. Women's achievements, particularly their gains in the field of media, will not be sacrificed for peace, she said. "These days, female journalists have concerns about the peace process and fear that they could lose their position, but I want to assure them that the era has gone when women had not a voice in media," she said. "Women's concerns will be taken into consideration. It will be discussed on the peace table," expressed by Haseena Safai, Acting Minister of Information and Culture.

Earlier, President Ashraf Ghani, who addressed a gathering of at least 800 women from around the country, also had stressed the need for preserving women's rights in the peace process and said the issue should be given a special attention during the upcoming grand assembly on peace in Kabul. "You are no longer victims of decisions on the future of Afghanistan," Ghani reiterated. "No one can impose peace on us. A peace which is not sustainable is rejected."



Let's Embrace Beauty and Peace

By: Liu Jinsong

Yesterday was International Women's Day, a festival China and Afghanistan share. We hold a photo exhibition for renowned Afghan photographer Fatima in these days. This is the first time for the Chinese Embassy to undertake a solo exhibition for an Afghan artist.

Miss Fatima is a member of the Afghanistan Photographers Association. Her works have been on exhibition at art festivals of many countries. She has selected over twenty master works, some of which are on exhibition for the first time. There are stories behind every work which are unique and touching. These pictures reflect the evolution and diversity of the Afghan society and expresses the senses of beauty and true feelings of Afghan women. They offer a vivid testimony to a famous saying of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the great Chinese revolutionary pioneer: Should this world be without women, it would lose the true by 50%, the good by 70% and the beautiful by 100%. How accurate the praise is for women and for the true, the good and the beautiful!

In both the Chinese and Dari Languages there is a saying: *zanimi az peykare jaame ast*. There are nearly 680 million women in China. At the second Session of the 13th National People Congress now going on in Beijing, there are 742 women deputies, accounting for 24.9% of the total, 1.5 percentage points higher than the previous session. In China, 70% of all women participate in the labor force and they account for 44% of the total employment. Women account for 52.5% of all college students. Now there are nearly 20 lady ambassadors and quite a number of lady ministers and generals. Among the hundred outstanding contributors to reform and opening-up honored by the Chinese government, there are 11 women.

You might find another figure interesting: an authoritative survey recently revealed that woman's income was more than half the household income in big cities in China last year. While gasping in admiration, men do feel much pressure. If you ask why the Chinese society is so peaceful and harmonious, the figure may offer an important clue.

The Chinese government attaches great importance to gender equality and guarantees to promote women's rights and interests. The Chinese Constitution clearly states: "Women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, in political, economic, cultural, social and family life." "The state protects the rights and interests of women, applies the principle of equal pay for equal work to men and women alike and trains and selects cadres from among women." China has also promulgated and amended the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women. In the Government Work Report delivered by H.E. Premier Li Keqiang on 5th March,

he specifically proposed to "strengthen maternal and child health care services" and "protect the legitimate rights and interests of women, children, the elderly and the disabled."

China and Afghanistan enjoy a strategic cooperation partnership of which the cooperation and exchanges between women of our countries is necessity. In the effort by China and the Chinese Embassy to support Afghan peace and reconstruction, we naturally prioritize development of woman's undertakings here. In the past two years, China has invited 190 professional women for training in China, donated a girls' primary school for girls in Mazar-e-Sharif, brought Kabul Woman's Martial Arts Team to China and successfully treated 25 Afghan girls with congenital heart disease. The "Chinese Hospital" in Kandahar, Kabul Republic Hospital, Kabul University, low-cost housing and National Vocational Training Center, all built with Chinese assistance, and text books and training aids delivered to schools with Chinese funds have benefited and will continue benefiting thousands of Afghan women.

Here in Afghanistan, there are many Chinese women as excellent as their male colleagues. Away from families, they make heroic efforts to serve grassroots Afghans, in particular their Afghan sisters. Madame Meng Xiaoli, chairwoman of the Afghanistan Chinese Enterprises Union has made charitable contributions to the Aludeen Orphanage for girls in Kabul. She said "children represent the future of a country. Girls in orphanages are a vulnerable group in dire need of help. We must care for them as we care for our own children." The dine of Orphanage and girls appreciate her benevolence and said this is what they need for most.

Last year a story went viral in Chinese social networks. Young mother Jahantab Ahmadi, with baby in her arms, spent two hours trekking mountain trails and nine hours on bumpy vehicles to get to her site of college entrance examination. She sat on the ground with baby crying in her arms to complete the exams while pacifying the baby. Many Chinese were deeply touched, for we believe that anyone with a dream and fight for it is the strongest in the world, regardless of gender or position.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Afghan independence. The biggest dream for the Afghan people is peace and reconciliation. Afghan women, who have suffered the most in the war and conflict, are the most ardent supports, defenders and builders of peace. Your desire for peace must be respected. Your dream for peace will for sure come true. In this process, China stand together with Afghanistan in a community of shared future. China will always stand by the heroic Afghan brothers and sisters, who have persevered enormous hardships, men and women alike, and together fight for more peaceful, harmonious and beautiful world.

Liu Jinsong is the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Afghanistan

THE DOHA EFFECT

A Diplomatic Hurdle From Dusk to Dawn

By: Naser Koshan

As recently as last year, Saudi Arabia, UAE and many other Gulf states cut diplomatic ties, and imposed a combined economic blockade on Qatar, alleging Doha for sponsoring terror. The opening of Taliban's political office in Doha gave the Qatari officials the opportunity, to act as a facilitator, and take the initiative to amend, and please the U.S. administration for turning the odds back to normal with its fellow Arab neighbors. Today the tiny coastal Arab nation is an apparent gateway, for facilitating peace negotiations between the American diplomats, and their Taliban equivalent around the clock. As we speak, Taliban and the U.S. special envoy for Afghan peace and reconciliation, ambassador Khalilzad, are concluding the fifth round of peace consultations, aiming for an eventual intra Afghan dialogue between the Taliban and Kabul government. The U.S. administration is more than willing to reach an acceptable end for the operation Enduring Freedom that was initially aimed at targeting Al-Qaeda whereabouts in Afghanistan, and prosecute its remnants around the world. Taliban on the other hand, are primarily demanding an immediate U.S. troops' withdrawal, partially eyeing to legitimize a lengthy 18 year nasty bloodshed, claiming many innocent Afghan lives.

The United States also understands that Taliban are adopting a new strategy, branching out from conventional Pak-Arab support system, to establishing links with America's adversaries Russia and Iran. The core circle of U.S. policy makers rightly understand that the crowded the players, the harder for NATO and U.S. forces to gain a sizable victory over the Taliban in the battlefield, which leaves no option, but reaching a fair settlement with the insurgents. A settlement that writes off the security of the U.S. and its western NATO allies threatened from Afghan soil, in return for gradual withdrawal of all foreign resident forces in Afghanistan. This in turn demands assurances on both sides, in remaining steadfast in promises made.

Absolute peace is a relative term in Afghan context, the country is deemed with continual crises, the annihilation of a well disciplined Afghan armed forces in late 1980s, paved the way for wealthy global jihadists to exploit Afghan hospitality, and began recruiting local dissidents in waging a full-scale civil war that torn the country into numerous ethnic boundaries. Afghans are rightfully skeptical about a possible peace truce that might create further frictions within the already deeply divided society. The clash between modernism and strict Taliban ideology can potentially drive the country into an even deadlier chaos.

The former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and close aides had unsuccessfully taken the initiative, to open secret negotiations channels with key Taliban figures, including Mullah Bradar who

is currently heading the Doha political office. Needless to say, the strive went astray when the group's handlers found about the links, Mullah Bradar ended up in jail and many other influential pro peace Taliban leaders were mysteriously killed across Pakistan. Now it is unprecedented that Taliban spokespersons are publically endorsing a peaceful solution; both parties duly recognize the status quo of the Afghan stalemate, and expressed undivided conviction in discussing all outstanding issues on the negotiating table.

The complexities of the Afghan peace process are intertwined with finding a viable common ground among multi faucet stakeholders. The American interests largely differ from what Iran and Russia envision for an Afghanistan next door. Arch rivals and nuclear armed Pakistan and India are also not sharing the same sentiment on the ongoing peace efforts in Doha. Pakistan is only giving up a fraction of Taliban in return for resumption of annual U.S. military aid to the country withhold by President Trump in 2017, citing its dubious policy in sheltering extremists and American enemies. Therefore, Prime Minister Imran Khan and his foreign secretary Qureshi are leaving no stone's unturned to get a monetized credit for making Taliban sit with the American delegation in Qatar, and enabling the group's negotiators mobility around the world.

Taliban right from the start have pursued a policy, talking with the Americans first, sidelining the Afghan Government as nonexistent and secondary to peace talks. It is partly because of settling old scores with the Americans; after all, it was the American military might that ended the Taliban regime in late 2001, forcing its leadership to seek protection in major Pakistani cities. However, President Ashraf Ghani has a different narrative on peace with Taliban; he eloquently favors direct talks with the group through his government, and reiterates on reaching a broader national consensus for a lasting peace. It is key for the American negotiators to keep the Afghan government on the loop, and respect the autonomy of its ally in remaining relevant. In retrospect the Geneva peace talks on Afghanistan failed in 1980s, lacking the participation of the two primary warring sides.

The Afghan government is convening a grand elders' Jirga, seeking insights on an integrated Afghan peace memorandum aiming to preserve all the gains in the last 18 years with respect for women's rights and reserving the Afghan republic status quo as key public red lines. The rapidly changing dynamics in South Asia will play a crucial role in successful progression of ongoing peace Talks with the Taliban. It is pivotal for the Afghan leadership to mount a systematic diplomacy, engaging all the concerning stakeholders for an entirely inclusive solution.

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