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

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Insecurity Haunts Education System

Insecurity in Afghanistan has influenced different walks of life in different ways. Education has been one of the victims in this regard as many schools remain closed in the country because of prevailing insecurity. The country is already suffering from low level of education and the closure of schools may prove to be more detrimental in this regard.

Ministry of Education on Wednesday, March 15, 2017, said in a statement that security threats across the country have forced the closure of more than 1,000 schools across the country. The ministry spokesman Mujib Mehrdad said that 17,482 schools exist in the country and among them 1,006 schools are closed due to the security threats and thousands of students remain deprived of education. Mehdad, however, emphasized that the ministry would distribute 12,000 parts of land in several provinces for the teachers in coming solar year. Nevertheless, the promises of changing the condition of schools have mostly ended up in smoke.

It is important to note that insecurity has haunted schools in various ways and has proved to be the most dominant hurdle. Taliban insurgents have bombarded the schools, shut them forcefully, targeted the teachers and students, attacked the students with acid particularly the female students, poisoned them and discouraged modern education in every possible manner. Even nowadays, in many parts of the country schools are being shut down because of lack of security and sufficient facilities.

Previously, the Ministry of Education had also disclosed that only 6 million Afghan children are at school, which is contrary to the 11 million claimed by the former government.

This is really pathetic and shows how such an important sector is being influenced by prevailing insecurity and lack of due concentration and attention by authoritative individuals within the society. Moreover, it is also tragic to find that there is no hesitation in practicing corruption even in the education, which otherwise should be considered sacred and beyond corruption. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to find that the authorities are now at least ready to accept the challenges that are being faced by the country regarding education. Only after accepting the prevailing realities can the authorities sit together and develop policies to counter the challenges.

However, this is largely dependent on the will of the authorities to do so. It has been found that the people who are supporting modern education within Afghanistan and are making tangible efforts for it are not in a large number.

On the contrary, Afghanistan is one of the countries that are highly influenced by such people who aim to block all the ways to improvement and modernization.

Blinded by religious extremism and outdated tribal values, they are always ready to oppose any sort of efforts that are devoted to spread education to the people of Afghanistan, as they know that the modern education that has been spread in the country to a certain level may encourage evolution and modern changes.

In particular, they are against the modern education for the females. The destiny-makers of this society know that if the girls are given modern education, they may question about their roles in rights. They may question the prejudiced rules and regulations. They may challenge the religious dogmas and in due course challenge the Mullahs and the illiterate tribal leaders. They may change the scenario and that is what the makers of the society do not want them to do. They want them to be passive and compliant, as in such state they would be easier to tackle and ruled over.

It is important that the responsible institutions and authorities realize the worth and importance of modern education and must encourage it as much as possible. Modern education is essential for Afghan society if it has to invite positive changes. Education, as a matter of fact, makes positive evolution of the society possible and embraces the new ideas and processes with open arms.

The nations of the world that have given value to modern education, made it universal and have made efforts to develop their education systems on the basis of modern and scientific systems have been able to earn astonishing growth and reputation. Simultaneously they have assimilated innumerable amenities of life for their people and have made them capable of living their lives with poise and decency. National Unity Government (NUG) during its initial days had made promises that there would be efforts directed towards uplifting the standard of modern education and making education accessible to more number of people; nevertheless, there are no true headways in that regard. Most of the policies of the government are in limbo as the ministries are not able to perform well and several of the ministers have already been declared disqualified by the parliament.

Thus, the institutional arrangements that could play some role in improving the education system within the country is, as a matter of fact, non-existent. Government requires diverting its attention to this particular issue before it is able to make promises and suggest the ways of fighting with the serious condition of education sector.

Syria's Conflict Leads to Unabated Sufferings

By Hujjatullah Zia

The tragic incidents and heart-wrenching stories make frequent headlines on national and international newspapers and people are affected, all around the globe, by conflict and militancy in one way or another. Despite the claims made by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) after World War II, the sufferings and anguish of mankind have not been mitigated. There is a strong sense of fear and disappointment in the public air and the rights and freedoms of all individuals, mainly the women and children, are violated in the worst possible way.

Syria's war is one of the indescribably life-threatening issues, which has been changed into a global war. The graph of civilian casualties and streams of blood spilt in Syria's soil increase with each passing day. Six years of violence have killed close to half a million people, according to the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, displaced half of the country's prewar population, allowed the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to seize huge swaths of territory, and created the worst humanitarian crisis in recent memory. The UN estimates the war has pushed close to five million people to flee the country, many of whom have risked their lives seeking sanctuary in Europe.

On Monday, in an address to the UN Human Rights Council, UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein described the war in Syria as "the worst man-made disaster since World War II". According to him, his office had been refused access to the country and that no international human rights observers had been admitted to places where "very probably tens of thousands of people are currently held. They are places of torture. Indeed, the entire conflict, this immense tidal wave of bloodshed and atrocity, began with torture," he said, citing as an example the torture of a group of children by security officials over anti-government graffiti in the southern city of Daraa six years ago.

"Today, in a sense, the entire country has become a torture chamber, a place of savage horror and absolute injustice," he is quoted as saying. Moreover, International Organization for Migration (IOM) says that about 525 people drowned in the current year while attempting to cross the treacherous sea compared with 471 in the same period a year ago.

The rising deaths came as the number of people making the dangerous crossing from Libya more than doubled, with 13,439 arriving in Italy compared with 5,273 a year earlier.

In 2016, more than 5,000 people lost their lives at sea, an annual record, as they took on perilous journeys to escape war, poverty, and persecution – often all three.

In 2015, some 3,771 refugees died while crossing the Mediterranean, up from 3,279 deaths the year before. The figures raised alarm on Tuesday among human rights organizations, which have repeatedly called for safer passages.

The rising deaths came as the number of people making the dangerous crossing from Libya more than doubled, with 13,439 arriving in Italy compared with 5,273 a year earlier. One year ago, Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations diplomat tasked with finding a peaceful solution to the war in Syria, described the subject of political transition as "the mother of all issues" in negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition.

Achieving political transition in the country has long been considered the most challenging part of ongoing diplomatic efforts to end the war that started in 2011 as a peaceful uprising demanding Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, amid widespread uprisings in the Arab world. It quickly turned into a civil war between government forces and armed opposition groups made up of army defectors and ordinary civilians, after Assad's government responded to the protests with force.

UN efforts have been hampered by the two sides' lack of willingness to compromise on their position with regards to political transition. The Syrian government has systematically refused to entertain any prospect of a transition that entails the removal of Assad, while, for the opposition, this step remains the only option for peace.

Three weeks ago, de Mistura brought Syria's warring sides to the negotiating table in the Swiss city, Geneva, for the third time over the course of the war, to discuss ways of ending the ongoing cycle of bloodshed. De Mistura promised another round of negotiations later this month to implement United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254, which serves as a framework for a political transition in Syria. But as Syria marks six years of war, the likelihood of achieving a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the war, rather than a military one, is becoming increasingly difficult.

Syrian government claims it must battle "terrorism" before discussing any diplomatic solution. It has succeeded in adding "counter-terrorism" on the agenda for the planned talks later this month, which, some analysts describe as a distraction ploy to continue its military offensive against the armed opposition.

On the other hand, opposition has steadily lost significant territory and leverage in Syria, for it is fighting both the Syrian government and hard-line armed groups including the ISIL and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), which will minimize the chance for a peaceful solution.

In brief, the flagrant violation of human rights and liberty by warring factions is a great cause for concern. Humans' fundamental rights, a highly debated issue, will have to be protected – it is not possible unless the peace talks and counter-insurgency come to fruition.

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The Return of Industrial Strategy

By Paola Subacchi

Industrial policy is making a comeback in many advanced economies. Dismissed out of hand in the go-go 1980s as a contributor to the previous decade's stagnation, it is increasingly viewed as a means to stem working-class voters' defection to right-wing populist parties.

But developing a modern and effective industrial strategy will be no easy feat. The European Union has been trying to define a consistent framework for addressing the topic since 2014, when it published an analysis of industrial policy's advantages and disadvantages.

The United Kingdom is further along, having released in January a green paper on building an industrial strategy. US President Donald Trump has also focused on industrial policy, though his version would presumably entail substantial state intervention and protectionist measures.

Trump's regressive vision, despite remaining short on details, already seems defective. But Europe's approaches to industrial strategy show some promise, not least because they are likely to eschew the broad interventions of the past that emphasized "picking winners." In the United Kingdom, for example, the government expects to focus instead on "targeted interventions" designed to create positive incentives, correct market failures, and address social, geographical, and sectoral imbalances.

Clearly, political leaders have learned some important lessons from history. But serious problems remain. Europe's governments seem to think that they can implement ad hoc policies that strengthen their "invisible hand" today, and that those policies will somehow end up fitting neatly into a coherent framework. That seems optimistic, at best.

The UK's new plan does not even pinpoint the strategy's main objective. Is it to buttress GDP growth when the UK is no longer part of the European single market and customs union? Or is it to boost the British economy's potential output (that is, to increase long-term trend growth)? The government's plan mentions both objectives, but says little about how they will be balanced.

UK leaders must recognize that, where the strategy is aimed at strengthening post-Brexit growth, it will probably have to be set in the context of higher tariffs vis-à-vis the EU, which would remain Britain's main market. Such a strategy would also have to take into account the global competitiveness of British industry, and complement the country's new independent trade policy.

At the same time, the British government must not get so caught up in preserving short-term growth and employment amid Brexit that it loses sight of the need to boost long-term growth potential. Worryingly, however, the proposed strategy may over-emphasize ring-fencing the government's own involvement in the economy.

While governments are right to shy away from picking winners, they must remain active in other ways. Specifically, they must analyze which sectors and industries are more likely to contribute to long-term growth, and help to enable their success – potentially even in ways that imply real financial risks.

For example, governments should consider large infrastructure investments that have positive externalities – say, shorter commuting times, with their economic and social benefits – and that may be too large or too risky for the private sector. This is particularly relevant where the government has access to a wider range of information than the private sector, strengthening its ability to optimize its investments.

Another component that is missing from current discussion of industrial policy in Europe is a clear timeline. The reality is that a strategy developed today could take a generation to deliver results (think education reform). So an effective industrial strategy must establish not only an overall timeframe, but also important milestones along the way. In the UK's case, those milestones should include shorter-term goals and outcomes associated with the Brexit process. After all, an effective modern industrial strategy requires a careful accounting of the assets and resources, including human capital, that the economy will need in the coming years. For the UK, such an accounting cannot be decoupled from Brexit.

In particular, UK leaders must identify which resources are tied to Europe's single market, how they can be replaced, and how long that process will take. The final critical element of an effective industrial strategy is the institutional framework on which it depends.
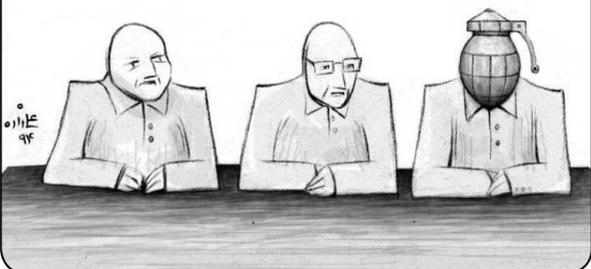
The UK government acknowledges the importance of creating the right institutions to address regional disparities. But institutions must go beyond linking up sectors and regions to ensure transparency and accountability, especially in the relationship between the private and public sectors. With that in mind, British leaders should reflect on which of the necessary institutions are already in place and which need upgrading.

It is important to resist the urge simply to shut down weak or inefficient institutions, and to consider, instead, how they can be reformed and strengthened.

Major changes are coming to the British and European economies. Leaders must act now to define a comprehensive strategic vision that will enable them to cope with the challenges ahead. That vision must be bold and ambitious. Above all, it must be shared. At a time of intensifying polarization, that may well be the hardest part.

(Courtesy Project Syndicate)
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