

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



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Security Concerns Keep on Multiplying

The concerns regarding security situation seem to be multiplying with each passing day in Afghanistan. The prospects of peace and tranquility do not seem very much clear as the terrorists are posing a serious threat to the Afghan government, security forces and the poor civilians. Different observations, studies and surveys show that there are very serious security challenges that Afghanistan has been facing recently and will have to face in the times to come.

Strengthening the same fact, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom on Tuesday, March 15, delivering his three-monthly report to the UN Security Council on the situation in Afghanistan said that deteriorating security and an increasingly vocal political opposition has placed increased pressure on the government in the past three months.

Haysom, in his report, said, "The security situation was increasingly volatile as the conflict grew in intensity and scope, resulting in high casualties and displacement among Afghan civilians... Afghan National Defense and Security Forces continued to face significant challenges in effectively countering the threats of insurgent groups across the country... Moreover, tensions within the government continued to slow progress on key appointments, including with respect to positions essential to the delivery of the government's reform agenda and to addressing challenges in such areas as security, the rule of law and governance."

The report revealed that between 1 December 2015 and 15 February 2016, the United Nations recorded 4,014 security-related incidents across the country. This represents an 8.3 percent decrease compared with the same period in 2014 and 2015, although it is noted that in 2015, January and February recorded the highest totals for those months since 2001. Consistent with previous trends, armed clashes accounted for the majority of security incidents, at 57.4 per cent, followed by improvised explosive devices, at 19.2 per cent. Targeted killings continued at a high level. From 1 December 2015 to 15 February 2016, 154 assassinations, including failed attempts, were recorded, representing a 27 percent decrease compared with the same period in 2014 and 2015.

Though the figures for the quarterly report may show a small level of decline in certain aspects, serious threats still exist and they may increase with the start of spring season. Moreover, the overall report for 2015 shows a rise of about 3% in security incidents as compared to 2014. Another aspect of the deterioration in security is the rise of the insurgents in certain areas that have not been previously their stronghold. Their rise in Badakhshan, Takhar and Kunduz clearly showed that they have been strengthening their positions in the areas that were not their stronghold earlier. The situation in the capital Kabul also faced serious threats. Since the dawn of the new year, the security incidents seem to be on the rise.

Haysom also revealed that the Taliban expanded its territorial reach in 2015, temporarily capturing 24 district centers in the north (in Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Jawzjan, Kunduz, Sari Pul and Takhar provinces), in the west (in Badghis and Farah provinces), in the east (in Nuristan Province) and in the south (in Helmand and Kandahar provinces), in addition to temporarily seizing the provincial capital of Kunduz.

With the rise in insecurity, unfortunately, the peace process with Taliban does not seem to be in a good shape, as well. Recently, Afghan government rebuilt its relations with Islamabad for a Pakistan supported peace talks with Taliban that involved other important countries like China and US. The Quadrilateral Group though had certain preparatory meetings and designed a road-map as well, Taliban rejected the offers for talks and issued a statement saying that they were not ready for talks.

It would be a great achievement for the Afghan government to make Taliban ready for a peace process and negotiate for a cease-fire. If Taliban get ready for a cease-fire it would mean that they are really ready for negotiations. No peace process can succeed unless the clashes stop and the parties in the war are ready to lay down their arms.

Another important factor for Afghanistan would be to convince Taliban to accept Afghan constitution, which seems a bit difficult as Taliban have always strived for a Shariah-based law in the country. It is really a Herculean task to make them ready to respect Afghan constitution and abandon their demand for a Shariah-based law as they are gaining strength on the battleground. They are even insisting on their own terms and conditions for the peace talks. However, for Afghan government, it would be a great loss if it compromises on its constitution which is result of years of struggle for a democratic system and for which the Afghan people and the soldiers have given large number of sacrifices.

Afghanistan, as a top priority, needs to reach to a conclusive position regarding terrorism, if it wants to continue its journey towards a democratic and peaceful state. President Ashraf Ghani has clearly indicated that he is serious about the issue and has always called for a regional and global cooperation to eradicate terrorism. Nonetheless, it is more important that Afghanistan must have its own strategy bold and clear regarding the issue and must follow the same through actions, not words alone.



Stop Violence and Bloodshed

By Hujjatullah Zia

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron."

During the Taliban's regime, we witnessed the human bodies torn to bloody shreds with fighters' shells, thunder of the guns with the shrieks of the wounded populace writhing in pain, waste of the humble homes with hurricane fire, the hearts of the unoffending widows wrung with unavailing grief, the women turned out roofless, along with their children, wandering unfriended the wastes of the desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun, flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring God for the refuge of the grave and denied it.

The Taliban movement grew from the Afghan orphans or refugee children who attended madrasahs. Their rapid rise to power must be seen in the context of chaos and civil war in Afghanistan, with warlords running amok and complete breakdown of law and order. The small band of Taliban was first led by Mullah Umar against a local warlord in Spin-Boldak and led to the capture of Kandahar in November 1994, with scarcely a shot being fired. The subsequent rise and spread of the Taliban in Afghanistan surprised most observers, and was generally welcomed by a war weary and destitute population.

To the development agencies the Taliban government brought some respite from incessant conflict. However, their tribal and medieval interpretation of religion led to the imposition of draconian policies restricting the rights of women and ethnic minorities. Their edicts on female education, dress code, and employment were largely based on an extremely orthodox misinterpretation of religious law, and a source of great distress to many in the Islamic world. In an ironic twist of fate, the Taliban era also saw Afghanistan suffer from one of the worst droughts of this century, which virtually wiped out many sectors of a largely agrarian economy. Despite plentiful evidence of the impact of economic sanctions on the most vulnerable in society, especially children, Afghanistan was progressively deprived of assistance to the extent that even humanitarian agencies found it difficult to operate.

Notwithstanding the hardship due to drought and sanctions, the Taliban policies brought disproportionate suffering and impoverishment to war widows and families in Afghanistan. Food shortages and malnutrition had their biggest impact on Afghan female children. Less obvious are the psychological trauma and

mental stress experienced by Afghan women and children and the impact of continued illegal conscription of child soldiers by all warring factions.

The lasting impact of war on the psychological state of women and children is well described. Many have post-traumatic stress as a consequence of witnessing or experiencing parental loss in war. Political repression and state terror have also been shown to result in significant psychological sequelae.

A landmark survey conducted by UNICEF, few years ago, on the effect of war on children aged 8-18 years in Kabul indicated that 41% had lost one or more parents because of the conflict, and over half had witnessed torture or violent death. Over 90% of the children interviewed expressed the fear of dying in the conflict. A particularly gruesome practice of encouraging children to witness public amputations and executions has an enormous impact on impressionable minds. Over 80% of the children interviewed felt they could not cope with events and that life was not worth living.

While such events can lead to considerable psychological trauma and distress, they may also inure a young mind to violence. The average Taliban and Northern Alliance soldiers are a product of the same cycle of violence and social upheaval experienced from early childhood. Ignorance, isolation, and a daily ritual of violence greatly temper their vision of the world.

Morally, the experience of indifference from the surrounding world, or, worse still, malevolence may cause children to suffer loss of meaning in their construction of themselves in their world. They may have to change their moral structure and lie, steal, and sell sex to survive. They may have their moral structure forcibly dismantled and replaced in training to kill as part of a military force.

It is self-explanatory that if warring factions do not sit around the negotiating table, violence and bloodshed will continue unabated which will take toll of combatants and non-combatants. It is feared that the Taliban and the self-styled Islamic State (IS) group will intensify their attacks in case of not reaching an amicable agreement. With the Taliban's last year spring offensive, hundreds of civilians lost their lives. The fact is that people bear the brunt of terror and militancy and it is no more acceptable. It is the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) to pressurize the Taliban to resume peace talk or the government will have to deal them militarily. In a nutshell, the government is supposed to "form a civil society void of oppression, atrocity, discrimination as well as violence, based on rule of law, social justice, protecting integrity and human rights, and attaining peoples' freedoms and fundamental rights, strengthen political, social, economic as well as defense institutions; attain a prosperous life and sound living environment for all inhabitants of this land".

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The Challenges Facing Afghanistan in 2016

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

The developments in Afghanistan in last two years - 2014 and 2015 - ushered in many of the today's challenges the country is facing. With the upcoming war season just around the corner, there are growing concerns over how Afghanistan is going to cope with the enormous security, political and economic challenges that have gripped the country today and are going to further intensify. UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan Nicholas Haysom said on Tuesday March 15, 2016 that Afghanistan was facing five major challenges to survive in 2016. According to the head of the UN mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA, the country would not be able to afford failing in dealing with these critical issues in this critical year.

Nicholas Haysom said that the Afghan government should deal with shrinking economy with low growth and high unemployment, the intensification of the insurgency and the fragile and fractured political environment. According to the UN Special Representative, the national unity government should also attract substantial aid from the international community and have 'progress towards lasting peace'. He warned that failure in overcoming any of these challenges would be catastrophic for the country. The warning from the top UN representative comes at a time when the new peace initiative is in a deadlock and the Taliban are preparing for intensification of the group's spring offensive.

In last two year, Afghanistan underwent key transitions. Firstly, Afghanistan had a crucial presidential election and its first peaceful transfer of power to the next administration. In the same year, the US-led NATO alliance concluded its combat mission and withdrew the bulk of its forces only keeping a small contingent for counter-terrorism mission and training Afghan forces.

The withdrawal of NATO forces had inevitable negative consequences for the country in areas of economy and security. It resulted to a considerable fall in flow of the international aid and stagnation of the economy due to decrease of economic activities. In fact, Afghanistan had to undergo an economic transition to cope with the economic consequences of the NATO pullout by finding new sources of revenues and helping growth of the economy.

The political transition went terribly flawed. The 2014 presidential elections and its political aftermaths plunged the country into a political crisis and pushed it to the brink of a potential instability and unrest. The flawed political transition had adverse impacts on overall situation of the country. Subsequent to the controversial elections, the political crisis in the country also caused a deep economic meltdown. The Afghan economy was never able to heal the harms of the election year. The political elite lost a valuable opportunity for making history by non-violent and non-

scandalous transition of power in Afghanistan. Many of today's challenges that the head of UN mission in Afghanistan believes are threatening survival of the country stem from the 2014 presidential elections and the political developments afterwards.

The agreement on formation of the national unity government, however, was ensued by a power struggle within the government that has continued to this day and left the administration ineffective and unfit for dealing with the existing challenges. In a critical juncture in the fight against the Taliban last year, a caretaker minister led the ministry of defense. Due to the lack of leadership, the anti-insurgency campaign lacked a robust leadership and the Afghan security and defense forces fought a defensive war against the militant groups. Along the political chaos going on in last two years, the security situation deteriorated to an unprecedented level.

Afghanistan is now bracing for another bitter year of war against the Taliban, while caretaker officials oversee all the security agencies. While the Taliban are preparing for their upcoming country-wide offensives, the government is starting to realize that the peace initiative may not help it in reducing violence and curbing the Taliban insurgency. The national unity government has been credited with effectively reaching out to the international community to better arm, equip and train Afghan security forces in the fight against the Taliban. However, it has had bad performance in empowering and strengthening the leadership of the country's security forces as it has failed so far to end the internal power struggle over the security ministerial posts.

On other hand, the economic initiatives of the national unity government for growth of the economy and generating employment have failed to see much progress due to the deteriorating security situation. The government has announced various large-scale economic development plans for 2016 and the upcoming years. However, the good economic growth and development programs will need security and stability in the country to progress well and pay off for the country's economy. For success of both the anti-insurgency campaign and the economic development plans, the government need to refocus on the management of the war and terrorism. Unless correcting the course, it will not be able to afford the deficit in the leadership of the anti-insurgency efforts.

In regards with political developments, the government will need to do more to garner political support it needs to deal with the security and economic challenges and the peace negotiations with the Taliban. The peace efforts seem to be largely in the right direction with the direction of the four-nation coordination group. However, the government needs to have 'strategic patience', as put by President Asraf Ghani, perseverance and more political support from the country's political spectrum.

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