

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



May 06, 2015

The Qatar Peace Dialogue

Afghan peace activists and Taliban representatives have gathered in Qatar for a two-day unofficial peace talks. According to the reports, Pakistani officials have also urged the Taliban to cease its spring offensive and start negotiations with the government of Afghanistan. The two-day 'open discussions' on peace in Qatar is coming as the first tangible sign of the Taliban preparing for engaging in a formal peace negotiations with the government of Afghanistan. The gathering held after months of diplomatic efforts from the new unity government of Afghanistan and a new approach towards the key regional powers who are believed to have high influence on the Taliban.

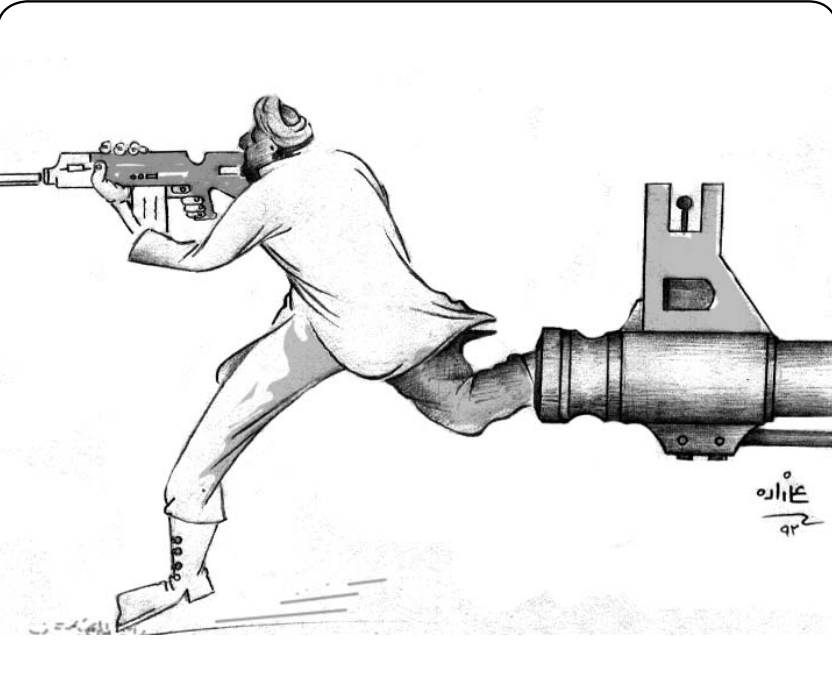
In recent weeks, the Taliban have been launching a deadly spring offensive against Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in many provinces. Seemingly, the recent Taliban offensive is a last-ditch battle as the group seems to be preparing for peace talks with the government of Afghanistan. By launching a widespread campaign, the militants aim to show that they have supremacy on the ground and still are able to launch deadly attacks. The Taliban leaders hope that a bloody fight on the ground will give them leverage in future peace talks with the government of Afghanistan. However, the ANSF reaction to the recent offensive by the militants has been decisive and the group has suffered heavy casualties and considerably failed to gain grounds. If the ANSF manage to inflict a heavy blow to the Taliban offensive across the country, it would also be a blow to the group's intention of taking advantage from the offensive in peace negotiations.

The previous peace initiatives have been failures not only for the government of Afghanistan but also for the United States who had been engaging with preliminary talks with the Taliban. The major reason for the failure of the peace efforts was that its failure to include major players to the initiative and attract their support. The government of Afghanistan under President Hamid Karzai failed to reach out to the Taliban and convincing Pakistan to help the Afghan government in its efforts for peace. The Karzai administration failed to seek a solution through regional cooperation that includes major players such as Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia as well as the United States. President Karzai's lacked a cohesive strategic approach towards the talks with the Taliban as well as relations with Pakistan, who has a high level of influence over the militant group.

Since coming to power, the new unity government quickly moved to prepare the ground in order to kick-start the peace process. President Ashraf Ghani made the talks with the Taliban his top priority. Along with rebalancing of Afghanistan's foreign policy aimed at benefiting peace efforts, the government of Afghanistan also sought national consensus over the new government's approach towards Pakistan and negotiations with the Taliban. The government of Afghanistan needs to keep the momentum of its heightened regional diplomacy aimed at engaging major players such as China, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. There have been shifts in Pakistan approach towards the Taliban; however, it will take time for Islamabad to put real pressures on the militant groups to start peace negotiations with the Afghan government.

However, recently there have visible signs that it may be still early to rely in the previous optimism and the flurry of diplomatic efforts. In recent weeks the government has been less talking of the resumption of talks while it had previously suggested that the talks would begin soon. The recent decline of government officials' talks about the peace process suggests the difficulties of the process. For sure, the process would see ups and downs and it may have considerable failures when it resumes officially. The most daunting challenge for the peace process would be the terms that will be laid by two sides as both the government and the Taliban do not seem to have any common ground for ending the violence and making a peace deal.

However, the government needs to not consider the process as a short-term objective. The Afghan government should go through the process of negotiations with the Taliban as a long-term strategy that may be derailed to some extent at some points. Keeping this in mind, the government needs to maintain military pressure over the militants' insurgency for the coming years. In fact, the Taliban should be defeated to a large extent on the ground so to be forced to come to table of negotiations. This two-track strategy would ensure that the Taliban would not gain supremacy on the battleground and, in the meantime, would gradually be convinced that there would not be military solution to the conflict.



What is the Qatar Peace Discussions Herald?

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Despite being labeled as informal, the recent peace talks between Taliban and Afghan government representatives in Qatar effectively marked the beginning of what was long expected to resume for exploring possible ways for peace in Afghanistan. The talks yielded no results at this point, as it was not expected to; however, as the government of Afghanistan expected, it might help thawing the ice that barred both sides entering peace talks as they used to set preconditions for resumption of peace negotiations. According to the reports, the participants were seen jubilant while leaving from the venue of the preliminary discussions hosted by Qatar foreign ministry and held in the Al-Khor seaside town. According to the reports, the Taliban have made a number of demands in the discussions as well as in a statement published afterwards. In the statement, the Taliban have asked opening of a political office through which the Taliban can go to negotiations and be in contact to the media and explain their stance on ongoing peace and war affairs. The group also has reiterated that they would continue the deadly insurgency until US-led foreign forces leave Afghanistan. The demands raised in the statement prove reaching a concrete deal with the militants would not be an easy task as the US troops remain in Afghanistan for the coming years. It also outlines the Taliban's approach to any peace talks with the government of Afghanistan that might happen in near future.

Seemingly, the continued presence of foreign troops in the country had been the trickiest issue in the early 'research discussions' between Afghan peace negotiators and the Taliban delegation. The reports suggest, the two sides failed to reach an understanding on continued presence of US forces in Afghanistan as the Taliban conditioned a possible ceasefire to immediate and complete withdrawal of foreign troops. This particular issue well heralds the future of the peace efforts and possible negotiations between the government and the Taliban. The Taliban have made it clear that complete withdrawal of foreign forces will remain a key demand of them from the Afghan government and a precondition to any halt of the ongoing bloody war in the country.

This means that it would be quite difficult for the two sides to be able to reach any agreement in the future over a number of tricky issues such as the US withdrawal and the Afghan constitution. The government of Afghanistan has hinted in the past that it was ready to provide the Taliban some political and power shares while strictly sticking to its stance that the constitution and the achievements of the past fourteen years should be preserved. Given the rigid stances of the two sides over women rights, foreign military presence, sharia law and the Afghan constitution, it is quite difficult to foresee a mutually-agreed peace deal in the future. However, as the military stalemate continues, the time will prove how the Taliban would accommodate themselves with their demands and the political concessions that will be proposed for them by the government of Afghanistan.

The recent sudden rise of the Taliban offensive across the country also corroborates the pessimisms that the Taliban may not be willing to come to

negotiation table for ending the ongoing conflict. Along with the group coming to Qatar discussions, the militants killed many Afghan security personnel in northern Badakhshan province. In recent weeks, the Taliban have waged a deadly insurgency in various provinces while in some areas they initially had considerable gains. The attacks showed that the Taliban are still determined to wage deadly war and inflict casualties on both security personnel and the civilians. It also underscored how difficult the peace efforts would be and how elusive peace may remain in the future.

The visible disagreement between Taliban and Afghan government delegations over US military presence in Afghanistan was not the only thing that attracted attentions to the gathering in Qatar. The Taliban also suggested some flexibility over a number of issues which stir hopes for many that the group might be willing to enter genuine peace negotiations with the government of Afghanistan and its international supporters such as the United States. The Taliban's softened language on the relations with outside world, civilian casualties and the involvement of other powers in the Afghan peace process was viewed as an apparent shift from the group's previous stance. Many hope this could ultimately lead to a real peace talks between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan.

The group's tone to foreign stakeholders suggests a considerable shift of the Taliban approach towards the outside world. "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan once again as a policy clearly states that it does not want to harm others and also won't allow anyone to use Afghan soil against others," it said, using the group's formal name. The group suggested it will open to participation and involvement of foreign and regional powers in Afghan peace process, saying it welcomes "the efforts of anyone in bringing peace to Afghanistan." This, however, shows that the group has also an eye to entering peace negotiations provided that their main conditions are met.

The fact should not be ignored that the Taliban have a totally different approach towards the outside world and the regional powers. The Taliban's message on foreign involvement in the Afghan peace suggests that the Taliban is approaching the outside world, and hopefully the government of Afghanistan, more proactively and through an active involvement and diplomacy. This could be the group's becoming more pragmatic to the realities on the ground rather than their willing for ending the insurgency and reaching a peace deal. If this is the case, the Taliban may be enter a peace effort led by government of Afghanistan and helped by foreign powers, but the group may not be serious in reaching a genuine peace deal in the country. The Taliban's determination for peace can be tested only when the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban start formal negotiations.

However, the recent peace discussions in Qatar can be viewed as a minor breakthrough. And this is quite enough to remain optimistic for the Taliban, or at least some parts of the group, to seek peace in the country. The two sides have traded smiles in the meeting, and this may a lot for the two sides who have abstained to sit face to face in last fourteen years.

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Afghan Journalism and World Press Freedom Day!

By Muhammad Rasool Shah

Every year, May 2 is celebrated as World Press Freedom Day. Having a look at the increasing difficulties for journalists due to war and violence in a number of Asian and African countries, the day becomes even more meaningful. The expansion, maturity and functionality of press can be considered the only remarkable achievement of Afghanistan in last 13 years of democracy. Although we also improved our infrastructure, built so many new buildings, made the democratic organs functional but in all these achievements, there are still so many missing points and we need many years before the nation enjoys the true benefits of the mentioned achievements. However, the maturity, freedom and functionality of press have really been remarkable. Some analysts call it the best performance of press in the region. Afghan press, starting from scrape, rose to new heights of professional achievements. In these 13 years, many journalists lost their lives, many of them got injured, many others were threatened by warring factions, warlords, terrorist organizations or government officials but the spirit of keeping high the standards of reporting is still the same and every passing day brings more and more firmness and dedication in this regard.

This day brings an opportunity to reflect on the true conditions and difficulties of press in Afghanistan. The biggest challenge for them lies in form of financial problems. Due to limited circulation, limited number of businesses, their advertisements, and least contact with the foreign world, they are struggling hard to make the ends meet. It is the reason why, the workers and writers of newspapers and magazines are paid very meager wages, which in some cases, make them work at many different places to meet their expenses. In such circumstances, it is very difficult to expect much from the writers who are busy in earning their livelihood and do not find enough time to study and write in a relaxed manner. This has definitely resulted in the decline of the quality of writing. In the same way, the workers of radio and televisions are no more an exception. They are also paid in a way that they keep worrying about their financial obligations and with this worried mind and thoughts; they are not able to give their best.

Second problem lies in form of opposition from a number of groups functioning in the society. Unfortunately, last 13 years of democracy gave way to the increasing influence and power of a small group of warlords, tribal chiefs, business tycoons and political elite who are not ready to hear anything against their ill ambitions and deeds. They are so strong that they can create large numbers of problems to the owners and Journalists. In the same way, editors take good precaution before writing anything against them. Media has also been a target of terrorist organizations and anti-state elements like Taliban, and others. Journalists can never go in open to the areas under the influence of Taliban. Business groups, warlords and other powerful groups of our society keep creating problems to the journalists if they hear or read anything against them. In the same way, role of the concerned ministry and government organizations have not been much productive in this regard. Criticizing government is getting difficult with every passing day and Journalists are following hidden and invisible

guidelines as what to do and what not. In the same way, at times our security forces and police officers get angry with the media when their faults or mistakes are exposed and made public.

Insecurity has also made limited the field of activity of journalists. Outside the capital city and other major cities of the country, rural areas are not under effective control of government forces and Taliban and tribal chiefs continue their indirect rule in the far-flung areas of the country. In such circumstances, journalists cannot make safe and convenient access to different parts of the country. In the same way, they find it difficult to travel to different parts of the country and bring the true picture to the people. In such circumstances, many events and incidents remain out of the coverage area, people listen or read only those things that reach to media with independent sources, and which cannot be further verified.

Another problem lies inside the media. Though lot of improvement has been made in last 13 years but still, many things remain to be done. There are many anchors who need to be well-trained to carry out their functions in more professional manner. There are many writers who need many training sessions to write according to the international standards. Except for a few newspapers, one can find large number of mistakes in grammar, content, proofreading and other aspects of news and the style of reporting is not according to the set standards of journalism. Due to these missing factors, the television and radio programs and writings in newspapers and magazines appear to be monotonous and unattractive. This fact also adds to the situation when the viewers or readers do not seem to be satisfied with the programs and writings of our media and they seem to be relying more on international sources.

Lack of adequate readers is also a problem and having a look at the present trend, the scenario does not seem to be changing in many years. Although our literacy rate has increased in the time of democracy but as a society, we are still infants in developing reading habits in people. Very limited number of people read newspapers or magazines and even less bother to buy and read books. Our youth is interested in internet and social networking sites more than the newspapers and books. Lack of culture of reading is another problem that would hinder the progress of print media in the long run. In all these factors, the role of government and its ministry has been counter-productive. The ministry exists only to check the contents of radio and television programs and newspaper writings. The ministry has turned into a censorship authority that has nothing to do with the quality of journalism but only checks if there is anything against government or important figures of the society. It has badly failed to realize its duties regarding improvement of overall standards of journalism. In the same way, instead of promoting publication of good books and magazines, the concerned ministry comes into action to ban a book or magazine.

Having a look at the above facts, there seems to be a long way ahead before Afghan press can be called free and effective. Starting from government, and then to the media owners and workers and ending at the general public, every organ of the society has to play its part in making this happen.

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