

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



October 20, 2016

## Cases of Violence against Journalists must be Pursued

Recently, concerns have been raised again in the country regarding the unwillingness of the relevant authorities to pursue the cases of the violence against journalists. Earlier in the week Nai - an organization supporting Afghan media - raised concerns regarding the plight of journalists and the response of the government authorities to deal with the cases of violence that have been targeting the journalists in the country. Second vice-president Sarwar Danish has recently highlighted that the cases of violence against Afghan journalists have not been investigated properly. On Wednesday, October 19, 2016 he called on Afghanistan's Attorney General to launch an investigation into the matter. He said in his statement, "Cases related to threats and violence against journalists remained pending within the ministry of interior, only a few cases were referred to the attorney general from amongst several hundred cases."

Statistics show that this year has been one of the deadliest years for Afghan journalists. So far in the year, about 14 journalists have been killed, which includes last week's incident of murder in Zabul in which a well-known journalist, Mohammad Yaqoob, from Afghanistan National Radio Television (RTA) was killed by a group of armed men.

Meanwhile, Media Coordination Committee (MCC), a newly established organization, having the responsibility to ensure the safety of journalists and their media activities has also raised concerns over inaction of relevant authorities to investigate the cases of violence against reporters in Afghanistan.

The situation for Afghan journalists does not seem to be getting any better. The rising insecurity and the lack of attention to the plight of the journalists has led to some very difficult circumstances that the journalists have to go through so as to perform their duties. Even the foreign journalists are facing serious difficulties in fulfilling their responsibilities. Kabul police recently warned the foreign nationals and the journalists in particular to limit their travels in the city because of security risks and the risks of kidnapping that seems to be on the rise.

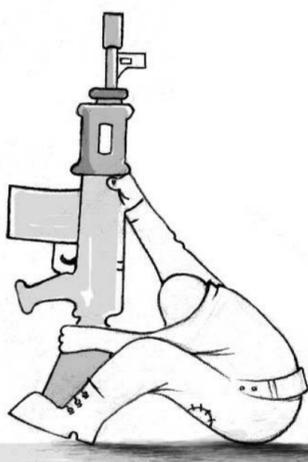
Afghan media organizations feel that the current warning by the police, in fact, demoralizes the spirits of the journalists in the country and would bar them from collecting information. Instead, the security authorities must ensure the security of the country as a whole and of the journalists, in particular.

Mostly, the societies that are well developed and have great respect for knowledge and information, make sure that the rights of the journalists are guarded properly and they are provided with such circumstances wherein they are able to perform their responsibilities with full dedication and devotion.

On the other hand, the societies that suffer from political instability and experience wars, and disturbances and do not recognize the worth of true knowledge and information tend to forget the vital responsibility of guarding the rights of the journalists. The journalists in such societies tend to suffer from different sorts of discriminations and, unfortunately, even lose their lives. Mostly conflict zones are dangerous for the journalists. In order to provide true and timely information, the journalists have to move into or close to the places where wars and conflicts happen. They, therefore, put their lives at risk and try to fulfill their responsibilities. Different groups, organizations or countries in such zones have to be very careful about the rights of journalists and make sure they are not targeted. However, that does not seem to happen and many journalists lose their valuable lives every year. Moreover, because of the influence and approach of different extremist networks, the number of journalists losing their lives in the peaceful countries is also alarming.

Apart from the right to life, according to International law, journalists are entitled for certain other rights as well which all the governments and organizations around the world must respect. Journalists, according to the Declaration of Rights and Duties of the Journalists, must have free access to all information sources, and the right to freely inquire on all events conditioning public life. Therefore, secret of public or private affairs may be opposed only to journalists in exceptional cases and for clearly expressed motives. Therefore, any factor hindering the journalists from having access to all information sources must be considered illegal and should be eliminated.

Moreover, the journalist have the right to refuse subordination to anything contrary to the general policy of the information organ to which he collaborates such as it has been laid down by writing and incorporated in his contract of employment, as well as any subordination not clearly implicated by this general policy. And, the journalists cannot be compelled to perform a professional act or to express an opinion contrary to his convictions or his conscience. Ill-fatedly, Afghanistan is also one of the countries that have not been giving enough heed to the rights of the journalists. The war and conflicts and the negligence of the relevant authorities have resulted in different sorts of discrimination against the journalists in the country. Afghan government and different other organizations and groups must make sure that they strive to protect the rights of the journalists as they are not a party to the conflict and do not serve anyone's purpose.



## Will Peace Talks lead to Peace?

By Hujjatullah Zia

Following the peace agreement with Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the escalated militancy and combatant and non-combatant casualties continued unabated despite the fact that Gulbuddin called upon warring factions to come to negotiating table. The Taliban's newly appointed leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzadeh staged heavy attacks against Afghan nation through Omari Operation, declared earlier by the Taliban's slain leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour. Fighting has raged across the country during the summer months, with the insurgents attacking the northern city of Kunduz and threatening Helmand's provincial capital Lashkar Gah. The Taliban gathered strength over the past two years, carrying out major attacks in Kabul and taking over swaths of territory for the first time since being ousted during the 2001 US-led military intervention.

Afghan government made great sacrifices within almost a decade to bring the Taliban to peace table. Besides the establishment of High Peace Council (HPC) in 2010, the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), comprised of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States, was constituted to hold talks with the Taliban but disintegrated as Mansour was killed in the US drone strike. Subsequently, the Afghan-Pak relations hit rock bottom and the blame game broke out with the Taliban's unmitigated insurgency. Afghan officials have urged Pakistan to eliminate the Taliban's hub from its soil and do not divide the militants into the bad and good.

On the other hand, Pakistani authorities denied harboring the Taliban and persisted on resuming the "reconciliation process". Moreover, the Pakistan army chief Gen. Raheel Sharif has lately offered Afghanistan stout support for combating the menace of terrorism, saying peace in the neighboring country is vital to regional stability. He added that the route to a peaceful and prosperous region ran through a stable Afghanistan, "which is achievable through a coordinated approach". Peace talks ebbed and flowed interminably and the Taliban elements played deceptive game despite Afghanistan's bona fide intention for truce. The futility of peace and Taliban's intensified attacks in Afghanistan did not only lead to the end of bonhomie between Kabul and Islamabad but also eroded the Afghan-Taliban's trust. In addition, the US determined that Mullah Omar's successor Mullah Akhtar Mansour was an obstacle before the talks and killed him in Pakistan's soil in May. Subsequently, Afghanistan did not pursue the talks as seriously as before, however, left the door open for warring parties in case of holding talks - only HIA made a peace agreement.

Of late, reports say that the Taliban and the Afghan government resumed secret negotiation in September and have held two rounds of discussions in Qatar, where the Taliban has

a diplomatic office, Guardian Newspaper cited anonymous sources. The newspaper said the talks were attended also by Mullah Abdul Manan, the brother of Afghan Taliban founder, Mullah Mohammad Omar, who died in 2013.

Meanwhile, it is reported that the Taliban's splinter group, under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Rasool, declared that they will hold talks if the withdrawal of US forces from the country is guaranteed. The group is ready to hold an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned talk, the splinter's group Mullah Manan Niazi is cited as saying. The group's readiness for talks was announced earlier by HIA's leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Perhaps the HIA's peace agreement with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has desensitized the Taliban's attitude towards the government and molded them into peace negotiator. Although the HIA and Taliban did not enjoy a good relation, but both pursued radical ideology and involved in insurgency in the country. If HIA's peace agreement has brought changes to the Taliban's mindsets and decision and got them resume peace process, it was a fruitful outcome for Kabul. But the question is that has it really changed their view positively?

If reports about Afghan-Taliban peace talks in Qatar come true, there seems no fruition in their discussion up to now since the insurgency continues unabated in Afghanistan. I still doubt the Taliban's sincerity. It is believed that any warring parties which give Afghanistan the green light will have to cease the war or at least alleviate their insurgency. Moreover, it is likely that Mullah Manan either does not represent Haibatullah - who cherishes a highly parochial worldview - in Qatar negotiation or seeks to play the game with new trick. On the other hand, the negotiators, if there are any (it is still veiled in mystery), might not represent Afghanistan's government and the alleged talks will be informal. In case of any talks, the Taliban's foul game should be an eye-opener for the government and the process should not be repeated as before without a tangible result.

In terms of the splinter group under Mullah Rasool, it is believed that this is doomed to disintegration within the serious battles and has been undermined in recent months. Furthermore, the Taliban fighters under Haibatullah also pose threat to Rasool's party. Seemingly, Rasool seeks an urgent panacea for the challenges of his own party rather than having mercy to Afghan nation.

There are no reasons for expressing optimism about a fruitful negotiation, especially when the endless talks were proved abortive repeatedly. To hold sincere talks, the Taliban will have to stop violence and bloodshed. Moreover, it was proved that the withdrawal of US forces led to worsening situation and the Taliban did not review their fighting strategy.

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## Taking North Korea Seriously

By Carl Bildt

We are living in dangerous and uncertain times. The United States is engaged in a bizarre and highly polarized presidential election. Its relationship with an increasingly revisionist Russia is undergoing what is essentially a "re-set" in reverse, while Russia's revisionism is also putting pressure on a Europe already plagued by uncertainty in the wake of the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union. Meanwhile, the Middle East is imploding, with wars in Syria and Yemen fueling a large-scale refugee crisis.

So overwhelmed are world leaders that many have had little time to focus on mounting tensions at the other end of the Eurasian land mass: the divided Korean Peninsula. But while the crisis in Syria may be the most urgent conflict the next US president will have to address, developments in North Korea could well turn out to be the most intractable.

Since North Korea detonated its first nuclear device a decade ago, its activity on this front has been uneven. But the regime has lately stepped up its efforts: two nuclear tests have been carried out this year, with the country's largest-ever device detonated last month. Tests of long-range missiles have also increased, suggesting that North Korea is slowly but surely progressing toward a deliverable nuclear weapon.

As usual, the international community's response focuses on sanctions. Indeed, the United Nations Security Council is currently discussing a new resolution in response to last month's test. Whatever the resolution's precise contents, it is likely that new sanctions will hurt. The question is whether they will hurt enough.

North Korea's economy is not exactly in a strong position to withstand much more pressure. In the 1950s, the North's economy was better off than the South's; today, it is 40-80 times smaller (depending on who is estimating).

While the North Korean government has loosened its grip on the economy slightly, enabling shadow activities to develop, the country's prospects remain grim. In human terms, the North Korean regime's failure to provide for its nearly 25 million inhabitants has been as tragic as it is spectacular.

Even the country's elite has been feeling the effects of sanctions, reflected in an increase in the number of higher-level defectors over the last year. Of course, political strain has also likely contributed to this trend. In South Korea, some are even considering the possibility of the North Korean regime's collapse, though others believe that the persistence of harsh repression will continue to ensure a kind of stability.

The North Korean regime has one critical source of support: China. Though China has agreed to tough sanctions, implementation has been lax, and its leaders have shown a distinct reluctance to tighten the screws on their client further. Unlike South Korea, which would welcome a collapse of the regime in Pyongyang (at least in theory), China fears the political and

economic consequences.

The fact remains, however, that North Korea's regime poses a serious threat to stability in the region and perhaps beyond - one that cannot be mitigated without China. While representatives of both US presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, have reiterated that the military option must remain on the table - direct US military intervention has always ultimately been rejected.

China's relationship with North Korea no doubt has had some influence over that decision.

So, to mount an effective response to the North Korean nuclear threat, the next US president will need to secure China's cooperation. That is easier said than done, not least because of America's recent decision to deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea. Officially, the THAAD system is meant to protect South Korea from the North Korean threat. For the US, its primary purpose is to minimize the risk of South Korea deciding to acquire its own nuclear weapons to counter the North.

For China, however, the system's advanced X-band radar raises concerns, because it reaches well into Chinese territory. China fears that it could be linked with more advanced missile systems either in Japan or on nearby naval ships, potentially posing a threat to China's strategic missile forces. These are valid concerns.

The US must reach out to China to explain the nature of the system and discuss measures that might address its fears. One possible approach, proposed by Yoon Young-kwan, a former South Korean foreign minister, would be to tie the existence of the THAAD system explicitly to North Korea's nuclear program. If the latter is eliminated, the missiles would be removed. The ultimate goal of talks should be to secure China's cooperation in developing a comprehensive peace treaty, signed by all regional powers, that normalizes relations with a North Korea that agrees to give up its nuclear weapons and commit to political reform. But the North Korean regime's past behavior suggests that, even with China on board, the chances of such a Damascene conversion are close to nil.

That is why discussions must also address what might happen if North Korea's regime suddenly collapses - a possibility, though not imminent, cannot be excluded. In such a scenario, a plan - agreed in advance by the US, China, South Korea, and Japan - that covers border control, refugees, port access, and military operations would need to be in place.

Without China's buy-in, efforts to curb North Korea's nuclear ambitions are likely to falter. In that case, the country's volatile leadership could eventually possess long-range nuclear capabilities - an outcome that must be averted at all costs. The last thing a dangerous and uncertain world needs is more danger and uncertainty. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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