

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



August 28, 2019

Afghanistan Peace Talks, Concerns, the Way Forward

The US and Taliban have resumed peace talks in Doha, Qatar, to chalking out a deal on the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in exchange for a Taliban commitment on security and negotiations with the government in Kabul.

Main Issues

According to the sources familiar with the ninth round of the talks, negotiations, which began on Thursday, are focused on three key issues: the mechanism of Taliban prisoners release; a decision on whether to keep US intelligence in Afghanistan after a peace deal; and at what level of leadership the peace deal between the two sides should be signed.

the US President has recently stated that some part of the US intelligence will remain in Afghanistan. It has turned into a matter of discussion for the Taliban and it has raised some concerns. Thus, in this round, they will again discuss the issues in detail, and then it requires to be shared with their leadership. At the same time, The Taliban will certainly raise conflicting issues that requires the US Especial Envoy, Mr. Khalilzad to share them after the end of the ninth round of the negotiations to be shared with the US leader ship and Afghan leadership. Taliban have repeatedly lauded out in the past an immediate pullout; while, the US negotiators have pressed for a withdrawal stretched over 18-24 months and then the Taliban softened their demand to nine to 12 months.

The Duel of Intra-Afghan Talks

Political analysts believe that the Intra-Afghan peace talks will be very tough and challenging; As a result, it will take more time that the US and the Taliban talks. They shall agree on a ceasefire during these talks. Then they shall discuss and make a decision about the type of the future political system of Afghanistan, reintegration of the Taliban fighters, transitional justice, minority groups and women rights and Afghan citizens' basics rights.

Concerns at the international level

Both the US politicians and top military officers have raised concerns about a hasty withdrawal and miscalculated trust to the Taliban. Recently, Sen. Lindsey Graham warned President Donald Trump not to reduce U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan below 8,600, arguing that maintaining a military presence there is key to defending the American homeland. According to Sen. Lindsey Graham, if Trump doesn't have a counter-terrorism force left behind, even if he's got a deal with the Taliban – which he doubts, but Trump might – they don't have the capability or will to protect the American homeland. He holds that the US shall keep around 8,600. Sen. Graham assumes that a peace deal with the Taliban is possible, but it would not be enough to fight the Islamic State terrorist group and al-Qaida in the region. In addition to this, Trump's moves on Syria and Afghanistan prompted the resignation of Trump's Pentagon chief, Jim Mattis. He was among the first combat leaders in Afghanistan, opposing a hasty withdrawal from both countries. Also, the former White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly, a retired Marine general, also opposed Trump's impulses on both countries. Further, according to the Wall Street Journal, some in Congress question whether deal would secure U.S. against another 9/11, as critics say elections could hinder talks on country's political future. These are very critical challenges that Afghan Withdrawal Plan faces. Lastly, the US and its allies must be very cautious not make the same mistake that the Soviet Union and international community made in 9190s.

Concerns at the National Level

Religious freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of Press, women rights, the rights of minorities and the basic rights of the Afghan citizens are at the stake in the Intra-Afghan talks. Now, it is a common concern that the Taliban may once more massacre other ethnic groups systematically as they did in the past. When the Taliban captured Kabul and some northern parts of the country, they systematically massacred Tajiks and burned their lands. They massacred Uzbeks in Faryab and Jawzjan and other Provinces in the north of Afghanistan. When they captured Maza-e Sharif, On Aug. 8 and the days that followed, Taliban militiamen and their allies – including militant Muslims from neighboring Pakistan -- methodically executed between 8,000 and 12,000 Hazaras in one of the deadliest mass killings of civilians in two decades of warfare in Afghanistan, according to interviews with witnesses who later fled to Pakistan and reports by international human rights investigators.

Supporting the ANSF by the US Can Prevent the Worst Scenario

When the withdrawal of Soviet combatant forces from Afghanistan began on 15 May ended on 15 February 1989 under the leadership of Colonel-General Boris Gromov, Mujahedin captured Kabul. Although, they had developed a roadmap for the future of the country, due to lack of Russian post withdrawal mechanism to ensure Afghan government can survive and prevent power vacuum in the country, different Mujahidin groups started fighting in Kabul and other provinces against the government and against each other. This civil war lasted nearly one decade and took hundred thousand lives and destroyed Kabul and other major cities. Based on this sad lesson, the US shall develop a sustainable mechanism to support the ANSF to prevent the collapse of the government and a new round of civil wars in the country. There were rumors that the US will cease support of the Afghan forces as part of any agreement, but Khalilzad cleared it that the SU was defending Afghan forces now and would do so after any agreement with the Talibs.

Afghan peace talks have raised many hopes and concerns both at the national and international levels. At the international level, it is feared that the US withdrawal will allow the Taliban to change Afghanistan to the safe haven of the terrorist groups once again. At the national level, people fear that a new round of civil war may resume in the country. However, it depends on vigilance of Afghans and the commitment of the US and its allies to prevent Afghanistan from changing to the safe haven of the terrorist groups once more to threaten the regional and international peace and stability.

We Need to Roll Up our Sleeves for South Asia's Children. And We Need to do it Now.

By: Jean Gough

These situations never cease to impress and move me: a girl who has never had the chance to go to school before, deep in concentration, learning how to bend and twist a shape drawn on paper into a word. I see another child being treated by a health worker – receiving the medicine that will allow him to survive another day – and many more thereafter. I am also moved when I meet a newborn girl, bundled up in her father's arms as her birth is registered and her identity is officially recognized. Later in life this proof of her age can help protect her from child marriage and child labour.

This happens every day across South Asia where millions of children depend on us – the adults – to ensure they can enjoy all of the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention is an international agreement that has inspired governments to change laws and policies so that children's rights are met – and this year we can proudly celebrate its 30 year anniversary.

All countries in South Asia have signed up to deliver these rights for children – including the right to the best health care possible, safe water to drink and nutritious food. Children also have, among many other rights, the right to play and the right to be protected from harmful punishment and sexual abuse.

One third of the world's children and adolescents live here in our region. If we can get it right in South Asia, we will have impacted a huge part of the globe's youngest generation for the better.

We have seen powerful and positive changes in children's lives in the eight South Asia countries over the past 30 years. Nevertheless, there is no time to waste if we truly care about every single child and genuinely wish to give each one the best possible start in life.

It is a core principle of children's rights that every child has the right to life, survival and development.

Nevertheless, the issues that we are facing in South Asia are daunting: data on nutrition shows us that the region is lagging behind sub-Saharan Africa in low birth weight.

A harrowing number of newborns never get the chance to live. Out of all new babies in South Asia, 2.7 percent die in the first

28 days of life. This is the same figure as sub-Saharan Africa. There are many reasons for this, but the lack of clean water – which often leads to child malnutrition and serious disease – is certainly one of them. The lack of investment in the nutritional care of women during pregnancy also has dire consequences for survival rates and the well-being of newborns: one in four infants in South Asia are born small and weak, often as a direct result of maternal undernutrition.

When we look at education, we also see a major prospect for change: attacks on children and education continue unabated, specifically in Afghanistan, and it is time to say "Enough!" A total of ten million children in our region are not enrolled in primary school and almost half of those who are, do not learn the basics of reading and mathematics. When we look at secondary school, a staggering 18 million do not have the chance to enroll. And one third of all children will not set foot in a pre-school even though this gives them the very best foundation for learning.

Then we have emerging issues such as air pollution and climate change – both of which demand an urgent call to action. Millions of children breathe toxic air every day and that can have a serious impact on their life span and even their intellectual capacity. The effects of climate change are undermining children's right to survive and thrive – and we have only seen the beginning of these unsettling developments.

I know I am not alone when saying that we as adults can and must do better. We have no excuses – but we have plenty of opportunity to act.

We know for a fact that societies improve for everyone when we invest in children. All evidence tells us that for each dollar spent on, for example, education and health, a society will benefit manifold.

So that is the great and uplifting news: if we ensure the fulfillment of rights we have promised the youngest generation, and if we protect and invest in our wonderful and talented children, South Asia as a whole will thrive.

It is very simple: when we, as adults, do good for our children, we do good for our world.

Jean Gough is UNICEF's Regional Director for South Asia

The Presidential Candidates are not Miserly in Giving Fantasy Promises

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

In recent days, as the election campaign became more competitive, the fantasy promises have also increased by the presidential candidates. Few days ago one of the presidential candidates, who is more similar to a humorist than a serious candidate, called everyone for debates ensuring that absolutely he will be the next president of Afghanistan. In fact, he was overconfident for becoming either president or interim president if the election process is aborted. He also said that he would execute all the corrupt political leaders when he gets the power. Some of the other candidates have also spoken in various gatherings making promises to their supporters which have no place in Afghan law, while he had also made such promises in previous presidential election which has never been fulfilled.

These kinds of promises and expressions, which are more like comic jokes, are only good for feeding the news and warming up the election atmosphere. Even, if they win the presidential election, such weird promises are not feasible in the country. Politicians generally make such kind of empty promises and commitments during the elections. But what is important is the fulfillment of these promises and commitments. If the promises and commitments are not feasible, it will be just for deceiving people and attraction of votes through unsound methods. This is something that people will judge about it on Election Day and the voters will respond to their promises with their votes at the ballot boxes.

In addition to the general promises and commitments, there are also some personal commitments that candidates give to some individuals or groups. These kinds of commitments are sometimes formally written and signed between two parties or two individuals. For example, the establishment of irresponsible and illegal institutions and commitment to create three provinces in one geographical area at the same time is part of a presidential candidate's commitment. In addition to such general promises, there are also a lot of alluring promises for public positions and governmental offices. In last election, many people had been given similar promises while none of them have been fulfilled yet. One of the electoral teams had unlimited promises including the establishment of several new provinces up to dozens of ministries while there are only 34 provinces in Afghanistan and 20 ministries.

In general, having such views and attitudes about governmental system indicate several important points: firstly, it shows a weak understanding of candidates about responsibility and authority of presidency. Secondly, it shows wrong understanding about people sense and lack of respect to collective wisdom. Thirdly, it also shows lack of candidates' commitment to law and democratic values in the country. Fourthly, it indicates that the candidate does not have the required ability to present an acceptable program to the people.

In the first part, some candidates still think that power is like a ready prey to be given to their relatives and friends or swallowed as much as they wish and distributed as spoils of war. As many individuals and political groups join their favorite team, the same amount of public positions or offices are granted to them in the next government while it is just fantasy. Even, they do not realize that some of the institutions such as Executive Directorate have no legal status in the structure of the Afghan political system. What was formed in 2014 was only for the sake of emergency issue to overcome a crisis and it is no longer applicable in the framework of Afghan legal system.

In the second part, the colorful and false promises mean to belittle people's collective rationality and understanding. Those who think as once they could deceive people, they can also use the same strategy again are making a miscalculation. This time, the culture of voting, people's expectations and perceptions are very different from all previous election as there have been many changes over the years. If they are the real electors, most of them will make decisions based on national interests and political understanding. Many presidential candidates have been already experienced in the past several years so people may forget the small mistakes but will never forget the big and destructive ones.

In the third part, using from the tactic of giving alluring promises, means that the candidate does not have the ability to present an acceptable program to solve national problems. As our country is engulfed with various problems, the candidates must be able to present applicable programs. In fact, everyone is responsible to vote on the basis of meritocracy and democratic values not false promises or old criteria such as race or language. We must check the background and patriotic loyalty of the candidate. We must not gamble the fate our country for a little food, money or alluring promises. Presidential palace is where political decision making and no one can do this for better, unless being armed with political piety, commitment and vast knowledge.

Lastly, everyone must adhere to national interests and code of ethics; and more importantly everyone should be respectful to the electoral law and other applicable laws of the country. Unfortunately, these days many are trampling the ethics of elections using hateful literature, especially in social media networks. Worse than that, there are people who not only violate the code of conduct but also disrespect people's understanding. We hope that the honorable candidates should not only respect the people's understanding, but ethics and electoral principles and must not cross the red lines of the law and national unity.

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