

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



December 26, 2015

Modi's Visit to Kabul

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Afghanistan on Friday, December 25, after his visit to Moscow. During his visit to Kabul, he inaugurated Afghanistan's new parliament building, which is funded by India and handed over three of four Mi-25 helicopters to Afghanistan.

The new parliament building costs an estimated \$90 million, and boasts the largest dome in Asia. It is a fusion of Mughal and modern architecture and is located near Darulaman.

The three helicopters given to Afghanistan were delivered to Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah at the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. A fourth chopper will be handed over to Afghanistan soon. The helicopters will be used in fighting against insurgents in different parts of the country. The helicopters' delivery is reflective of India's defense cooperation with Afghanistan, whose air force is currently in the process of being developed.

Regarding the issue of regional cooperation in war on terror, Modi said, "We know that Afghans success needs cooperation of all neighbors and all of us in the region. India, Pakistan, Iran and others must unite and cooperate for this common purpose... We are working to enable Afghanistan to be connected with other countries in order to help it become a connecting hub for South Asia".

India has always endeavored to follow the policy of cooperation and support in its relation with Afghanistan. It has always pursued economic development, political stability and peace and tranquility in the country.

People of Afghanistan also consider India as its friend. The public opinion in Afghanistan is highly in support of greater Indian influence in the country, and it is because of the fact that through most part of its relation with Afghanistan, India has been a true friend.

After the overthrow of the Taliban, India established diplomatic relations with the newly established democratic government, provided aid and participated in the reconstruction efforts. India has provided \$650-750 million in humanitarian and economic aid, which makes it the largest provider of aid to Afghanistan in the region. India's support and collaboration are mostly in the areas of rebuilding of air links, power plants and investing in health and education sectors as well as helping to train Afghan civil servants, diplomats and security forces. India has also keen interest in the development of supply lines of electricity, oil and natural gas, and, also providing scholarships to Afghan Students.

The Indian Army's Border Roads Organisation constructed a major road in 2009 in the remote province of Nimroz, which connected Delaram to Zaranj. This has proved to be a reliable alternative route for the duty-free movement of goods through the Chabahar port in Iran to Afghanistan. One of India's key strategies in Afghanistan is to build up transportation links that can help Afghan economy's transportation links.

During Hamid Karzai's visit to India in April 2006, three memorandums of understanding (MOUs) for strengthening cooperation in the fields of rural development, education and standardization between the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) and Afghan National Standardization Authority were signed between Afghanistan and India. An agreement providing \$50 million to promote bilateral businesses between Afghanistan and India was also signed during the visit of the former Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, between 29 June - 1 July in 2006. During the same year, India raised its aid package to Afghanistan from \$150 million to \$750 million.

During the 15th SAARC summit in Colombo, India pledged another \$450 million alongside a further \$750 million already pledged for ongoing and forthcoming projects. In August 2008, the then President Hamid Karzai visited New Delhi. This visit further strengthened bilateral relations, and Prime Minister Singh pledged further aid for Afghanistan. India's pledge to rebuild Afghanistan reached a total of \$2 billion in May 2011 after Manmohan Singh visited Kabul for a two-day visit.

India seeks to expand its economic presence in Afghanistan in the post withdrawal era. In particular, it wants to improve transport connectivity and economic collaboration with countries in Central and South Asia. More such projects are likely to come up, which includes setting up Iron ore mines, a 6 MTPA steel plant (by SAIL - Steel Authority of India Limited), an 800 MW power plant, Hydro-electric power projects, transmission lines, roads etc.

In short, India has played a significant role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation process in Afghanistan. India's extensive developmental assistance programme, which equals around \$2 billion, is an indicator of its abiding commitment to peace, tranquility and prosperity in Afghanistan during this critical juncture of security and governance transition. This makes India one of the leading donor nations to Afghanistan, and by far the largest among the regional countries. India also realizes the fact that there can be stability in Afghanistan only if all the major actors and countries have a stake in its stability, development and growth. Realizing this India has been increasing efforts to attract regional and trans-regional investment into Afghanistan that provides a reliable alternative to the dominant narrative of extremism and offers job opportunities to its population, by initiating events like the Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan in June 2012. Recognizing that the region holds the key to peace in Afghanistan, India has an important role in confidence building measures in the region in accordance to the Istanbul Process. India's support for Afghanistan is of immense importance and the people of Afghanistan also realize this fact and they wish that India should keep its assistance continue until it is able to stand on its own.

Seeking Peace Talk Was Counterproductive

By Hujjatullah Zia

According to reports, Sangin district fell to the Taliban after hours of fierce clashes that killed more than 90 soldiers in two days. The Taliban's spring offensive was intensified following the appointment of Mullah Akhtar Mansour as its leader; the armed group captured new territories in northern and eastern Afghanistan. Addressing a press conference, Afghanistan's Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah said that "an urgent meeting will happen soon to take immediate security action in Helmand".

The Taliban insurgents took over the northern city of Kunduz last month before it was driven out from the strategic city by Afghan forces backed by US air strikes. It was the first time the Taliban made such gains in Kunduz since the US-led invasion ousted them from power in 2001.

It comes as the resumption of peace talk - which derailed in late July weeks after its start - has come to the limelight. It is said that the broader understanding for restarting the peace process was reached among Pakistan, Afghanistan, the US and China during Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's visit to Islamabad on December 09 for attending the Heart of Asia conference.

Pakistani officials believed that the biggest challenge to the start of the new process was the Taliban's attack on Kandahar airport. Militants attacked the airport almost at the same time as Ghani landed in Islamabad for attending the Heart of Asia Conference. Afghan High Peace Council denounced the latest attacks as "a slap in the face of peace". Similarly, the former head of National Directorate of Security (NDS), Rahmatullah Nabil, resigned over disagreements with President Ashraf Ghani. Nabil, who strongly opposed Ghani's moves toward a rapprochement with Pakistan, said in his letter of resignation from the National Directorate of Security (NDS) that there had been "a lack of agreement on some policy matters" in recent months. He said that the president had imposed unacceptable conditions on the way he did his job, with "repeated verbal summons" that put him under impossible pressure and forced his resignation. In an angrily worded post on Facebook that appeared before the resignation letter was made public, Nabil made clear his frustration with efforts to work with Pakistan, which many in Afghanistan accuse of controlling the Taliban. Nabil, in his Facebook post, said the blood of innocent people spilled in recent attacks was "the same color as the red carpet we trod like a catwalk".

Thousands of civilians, soldiers and police have been killed as the Taliban has extended its grip on swathes of the country, piling pressure on National Unity Government (NUG). "The temporary seizure by the Taliban of Kunduz city, as well as 16 district centres, primarily across the north ... underscored the challenges faced by the government and security forces in main-

taining stability across the country," Nicholas Haysom, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan is quoted as saying. He also said that between August 01 and October 31, 6,601 security-related incidents involving civilians were documented by the UN which, according to him, represented a 19 percent increase against the same period last year when 5,516 incidents were recorded. He warned of intense insecurity in around 25 provinces and indicated that the presence of the self-styled Islamic State (IS) was a matter of great concern. Regarding the Helmand province, he said clashes between security forces and insurgents intensified during the three-month period resulting in the displacement of about 2,054 families.

In spite of the reports about resumption of peace talk, the Taliban insurgents have increased their attacks across the country. Perhaps, the splinter groups intend to sabotage the plan for negotiation as ever. Previously, the revelation of Omar's death and Akhtar Mansour's appointment stalled the Murree talk. Mansour called the talk as "enemies' propaganda" and organized heavy attacks in the country - which led to great casualties.

In fact, Pakistan used coercion, 'diplomatic' pressure and persuasion by its proxies within the movement to achieve the limited goal of the Murree meeting. These achievements were unlikely to last or contribute to the ultimate goal - a political settlement. An authentic change of mind in as fragile a process as peace-making has to come from within the Taliban movement itself, ideally through its own mechanisms of deliberations and policy-making. It is believed that if the Murree meeting had been a natural outgrowth of the Taliban's internal policy-making, the movement would have most likely made sure all the various branches had been briefed. The Taliban would have taken measures before going into formal talks with the government. The most important would have been a thorough internal discussion with officials on the ground and making sure the talks were not portrayed as dictated by an external force, especially Pakistan.

The Taliban show no real tendency towards peace talk - their unmitigated offensives demonstrate the fact. I believe that the splinter groups and Islamic State militants pose great challenges to the peace process. Since some members of Taliban have pledged loyalty to the IS, they will be the first distracters. The government will have to respond to the recent attack strongly and the temporary seizure of Kunduz should have been an eye-opener for the officials. With the escalated militancy - which leads to the indiscriminate killings of combatants and non-combatants alike - one will conclude that the fruition of the ever-fruitless-tree of peace talk will be no more than a mirage and, therefore, it would be naïve of the High Peace Council (HPC) to seek with hope.

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The Rumors of Unauthorized Helicopter Flights

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Reacting to reports of mysterious cases of unidentified helicopters landing in some provinces, the Afghan Acting Defense Minister said that the government investigates the rumors that militants are transferred by helicopters into different parts of the country. For many years, at some points there have been reports of suspicious helicopter flights across the country, and at other times, allegations of militants being transported into specific areas across the country. Speaking to a news conference, Masoom Stanekzai said that a joint commission including officials from the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Air Force and National Security Directorate was responsible to go and investigate the areas where the alleged helicopters are said to have landed. The acting defense minister said that it is possible that emergency landings happen in some border regions of the country. Mr. Stanikzai added that Afghanistan has no nationwide radar system and the country's airspace is not under its control.

The reports once again highlights the questions raised to the public over what external or internal circles are having mysterious involvement in the ongoing conflict and helping Taliban to expand and continue the violence. In the past, the questions have been repeatedly raised by MPs, government officials, the media and the activists. However, the government has so far rejected the allegations that unknown and unaccounted helicopters are transporting insurgents into conflict zones across the country. Reacting to the recent rumors, Afghan Acting Defense Minister said that the purpose of spreading the rumors was to undermine morale of the public and involving us "in a psychological warfare". However, he fell short of rejecting the news categorically, reassuring that the government would examine the issue thoroughly.

There is no doubt that different circles particularly external players have always played a complicated game in Afghanistan's long-lasting conflict. Many international and regional spy agencies have been involved in some way and overt and covert activities supporting one of the many sides of the current conflict in the country. And there is no doubt that such foreign, and possibly internal, actors are still involved in supporting the insurgent groups or other sides of the conflict in one way or another. Lack of a total control over the intelligence affairs in the country, or put in other words, lack of intelligence sovereignty leaves Afghanistan particularly vulnerable to the possible foreign actors involved with the Afghan conflict as well as insurgent groups who are backed by many circles in the neighboring and regional countries. There has always been a war of intelligence among the parties involved in the country's conflict. Perhaps no government official would deny involvement of foreign spy agencies or other actors in Afghanistan's current insurgency. Therefore, the government needs to be honest with the public, so to be able to convince the people that the government is defending them against the threats and will protect them from whatever threats in the future. In such a chaotic environment of war and intelligence, the government needs to

be transparent over the issue with the people. It should inform the public to the extent it knows of what external or internal groups or regional countries are being involved in Afghanistan. A sense of distrusts among the public to the government would not help the security and intelligence agencies to provide security and gain the confidence of the public. Public confidence to what the government is doing to counter the threats emerging from the militant groups and other external players would enable the state to restore order and security and better fight the insurgent groups. In contrast, public distrusts to the government would undermine its efforts to fight the Taliban and improve security across the country. On the other hand, the government needs to be more transparent on such issues so to end the environment of distrusts among the public to some influential government circles political groups being involved in promoting violence in the county or supporting the insurgent groups. A poisoning political environment of distrusts would not be helpful for the country at such a difficult time when Afghanistan is struggling to contain the insurgency.

It is not for the first time such reports are published or such claims are made over suspicious activities of known and unknown groups operating mysteriously in the country. There have been reports of movement of mysterious helicopters flying into the northern part of the country. Previously, former president Hamid Karzai bitterly criticized and expelled two UN employees for having relations with the Taliban. Once he criticized foreign troops for have secret dealings with the militant groups, for instance in Maidan Wardak province. At other times, there were reports of dealings between the militants and foreign or internal actors operating in Afghanistan. Recently, senior Mujahedin leaders and MPs accused politicians and circles of having relations with the Islamic State and other militant groups. Not investigating such claims will create serious threat to the country's long term security and stability from foreign spy agencies and other actors as well as those internal circles having relations with other countries and the militant groups.

The government needs to do more and take more serious the allegations of involvement of any groups in the ongoing security and war affairs in the country. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure no unauthorized military and nonmilitary planes land in Afghanistan's soil, including the border areas, without prior permission from the government of Afghanistan. The government should be able to reaffirm its control over the country's aerial and intelligence affairs in the country. If any such activities are true, no difference which parties is involved, the Afghan security agencies should take decisive actions to eliminate the threats. Such activities are fuelling the violence and instability in the country and further worsen the situation in different provinces. It is an issue of the country's sovereignty, security and long-term stability. The authorities should not neglect the reports over the mysterious activities of transportation of fighters into conflict zones across the country.

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