

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



July 28, 2015

Inauguration of Salma Dam

A major portion of work on long-awaited Salma Dam has at last been completed. The closure of the diversion tunnel gate has taken place and the filling of the reservoir has already started. It would take the reservoir about 9 to 12 months to fill and then the dam can become fully functional. Salma dam is a \$ 300 million hydroelectric and irrigation project constructed on Hari Rud River in Chiste Sharif district, and has the goals of 42 MW power generation and irrigating 80,000 hectares of land.

It is flagship infrastructural project of India's developmental assistance programme to Afghanistan.

The project includes construction of 107.5 m high and 550 m long rock-filled dam and other typical components of the hydroelectric power project such as spillways, a powerhouse, switchyard and a transmission line.

This dam is of immense importance for Afghanistan and can support in solving the issue of electricity generation of the country to a certain level. At least, the province can benefit to a great extent in this regard. Moreover, the irrigation system developed from the dam can benefit the province in making advancements regarding its agriculture.

Now that 80% of the work has been completed on the dam, there are hopes that there will not be any major problem regarding the remaining work and the dam will be functional soon. However, there have been tough times during the process of the construction and various controversies have been attached to it. According to a statement by Consul General of India in Herat province, the dam had faced several logistical constraints and security challenges contributing to a delay of several years and is now expected to be completed by mid-2016.

Salma dam was initially built in 1976 on the Hari river basin, but was damaged early during the Civil war in Afghanistan. The rebuilding of the dam was first started by an Indian company (WAPCOS Ltd.) in 1988, but the project was left incomplete for a significant period of time due to the ongoing instability caused by the civil war. In 2006, India committed to funding the completion of the Salma Dam at an estimated cost of \$200 million.

In January 2013, the Indian cabinet approved revised cost for the completion of the project and declared it would be completed in December 2014, or 2 years behind the previous schedule. And, now most probably it will be totally completed by 2016.

The Afghan leaders and people have welcomed the news that major portion of work is now completed and they expect that insecurity and political situation will not hamper the remaining work.

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah on Monday expressed satisfaction on the completion of parts of the dam and he hope that it would help resolve the problem of shortage of energy and power besides strengthening the agriculture sector in the western zone.

India has been very supportive to Afghanistan as far as economic growth and the infra-structure development are concerned. The people of Afghanistan consider India as a friend and always appreciate its help. India at the same time has kept on assisting Afghanistan in different development projects and Salma dam is just another example in the same regard.

Meanwhile, some Afghans consider that politicians in Iran are trying to stop work on the dam project, which would lessen the flow of river water into Iran. According to the local Afghan National Police of the area, Iranian government is funding local Taliban members to oppose construction of the dam.

On the other hand in March 2013, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) claimed that Taliban's Quetta Shura attempted to blow up the Salma Dam with 1,300 kilograms of explosives. According to NDS spokesman Shafiqullah Tahiri, "Mullah Abdul Ghani, a member of the Quetta Shura who plans suicide attacks, was behind the conspiracy." The explosives were discovered in a deserted area of the Pashtun Zarghun District of Herat Province. One person by the name of Sayed Gul was arrested.

Afghanistan is one of the countries that is in crying need of infra-structure development, which could be instrumental in supporting Afghan economy so that it is able to stand on its own and push the people towards peace and stability. The neighboring countries, therefore, must support Afghanistan in this regard and set a good example of cooperation. In the long run, it is only the economic development that can assist Afghanistan in fighting the menace of terrorism and insecurity, which will, at the same time, be very much supportive in maintaining peace throughout the region.

Wrestling with Instability

By Hujjatullah Zia

The rise in civilian casualties has been attributed to a surge in battles between government forces and the armed opposition, mainly the Taliban. And while the war, for Afghans, is not over, it is clearly morphing. With international forces largely withdrawn from the provinces, insurgents have taken the fight back to the battlefield where indiscriminate weapons such as mortars and rockets prevail.

As a result, 2014 saw a 54% increase in civilian casualties from fighting, while the number of victims from improvised explosive devices, such as roadside bombs, remained almost the same.

The UN attributes 72% of the civilian casualties to insurgents and 14% to government forces. As the army and police have assumed responsibility for security, insurgents have moved the fight closer to district centers and residential areas, increasing the risk to civilians.

Insurgents have also targeted civilians directly, as with the killing of 34 mine clearers and the torching of houses belonging to government officials. Recently a female provincial council member died from wounds sustained in a bomb blast in Nangarhar province.

However, the consequences of the fighting go beyond just casualties. 2014 saw an 8% increase in people displaced by conflict, bringing Afghanistan's overall number of internally displaced people over 800,000, said the UN.

Meanwhile, the number of Afghan refugees who returned home from Pakistan surged in the first half of the year, exceeding the number who crossed the border in the whole of 2014, said the UN refugee agency (UNHCR).

Reports say that more than 139,000 Afghans have returned from Pakistan since the start of the year, many saying they did so because of alleged harassment after the deadly Pakistani Taliban attack on a school in Peshawar last December. Many of the Afghan refugees said they had to return to their homeland because the situation in Pakistan had become too difficult, though some were unable to reach their homes in areas affected by fighting.

"In today's situation where the fighting is spreading and increasing across the country, many returning refugees become displaced in Afghanistan," UNHCR spokesperson Mans Nyberg is cited as saying. "They may not be able to go back their home village so they choose to go to a secure place, which is usually a city or a larger town somewhere. That happens in many cases."

The escalated militancy on one hand and the flooding of Afghan refugees on the other hand compound the challenges. Those who return home in the hope of breathing a sigh of relief in their own homeland and dream to

live in a society void of humiliation and harassment will encounter further problems - mainly violence and bloodshed. To their unmitigated chagrin, the burgeoning political turmoil will spoil their dreams for utopia and the nascent democracy will not be a panacea for their problem.

A number of returnees are believed to be the second and third generation born outside the border and Afghanistan seems to them completely a new country. Encountering an impromptu situation, they will have to deal with worse scenario. Nyberg has further said, "In today's situation where the fighting is spreading and increasing across the country, many returning refugees become displaced in Afghanistan... Afghanistan is still the largest protracted refugee situation in the world."

It is patently obvious that people are highly prone to political instability and take the brunt of militancy and terrorism. Currently, the public are wrestling with a number of difficulties such as unemployment, economic recession, etc. which stem from political upheaval. Moreover, the abduction of citizens including women - which is an unprecedented episode in the country - and the rise in death toll aggravate their hardships. In short, people suffer the burgeoning challenges in one way or another.

After all, fomenting racial tension is likely to be the militants' new tactic used to harm the state. Recently, the armed militants' abduct simple travelers, from a particular ethnic minority, to gain priority from the government. Their intents and purposes are to provoke the anger of an ethnicity against another and to fan the flame of animosity.

Seemingly, the world has forgotten Afghanistan and all the challenges going on across the country. The foreign forces left our bleeding nation in the lurch and the international community has decentralized its financial and military supports. "It's a concern that the world is forgetting about Afghan refugees, and donors are turning their attention elsewhere," Nyberg said. With the withdrawal of the US-led NATO troops, the war has been brought to battlefields once more and the self-styled Islamic State group has emerged in the country the same as in Iraq. Thus, it is feared that the scenario of Iraq will be repeated in Afghanistan.

One will conclude that Afghanistan is in the grip of political syndrome and dependent to foreign military and financial aids. Contrary to the public ambition, the security situation has been deteriorated with the establishment of National Unity Government (NUG) and the citizens' ballots have been changed into bullet targeting them in some ways. The wall of mistrust between nation and state is growing higher with each passing day. To bridge the gap, the state has to put an end to the political chaos. Moreover, the world, particularly the international community, is supposed not to forget Afghanistan - yet it is the state to earn the trust of the international community through a sound administration.

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Tackling the Tenacious Insurgency

By Ewaz Ali Bahrami

Since the coalition troops ended its combat operations in Afghanistan and the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed after the last year presidential elections, security conditions have been exponentially worsening by each passing day. The vacancy of national defense ministry seat, a fresh wave of high profile Taliban attacks, disputes inside the government and the drawdown of the NATO-led international troops are said to be major causes of the sharp rise of insecurity in the country. On one hand, the Taliban have been preparing for peace negotiations with the government; while on the other hand, they have increased their offensives inside Afghanistan. In recent months, Afghans witnessed heightened armed conflict on a daily basis. The Taliban even took control of two of Kunduz districts though the Afghan National Army soon wiped them out from those districts. What has caused the exponential rise of insecurity, and how will Afghans and the government react to the imminent threat of the resurging Taliban and other militant groups?

In 2014, Afghanistan witnessed its first-in-history peaceful transition of power from Hamid Karzai to President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah. As the new government took power, the US-led coalition troops gave an end to its combat mission in Afghanistan nick-named Operation Enduring Freedom by withdrawing most of the troops by December 31, 2014. The two security and political transitions in Afghanistan in 2014 had profound impacts on security and stability of the country and considerably contributed to the worsening situation.

Given the security vacuum due to the withdrawal of international troops and the Afghan politicians being busy in electoral politics and formation a new government, the Taliban exponentially increased their attacks. With the security deteriorating, Afghans are worried about the worsening security situation more than ever. Thousands of people are fleeing the country; the Afghani currency's value has dropped considerably in the international exchange rates; and unemployment has risen inevitably. Afghans now seem to be expecting a more difficult year ahead and yet a more grim future.

In the meantime, the Islamic State group (IS) has started recruiting fighters in many Afghan provinces. The Syria-born ISIS, which controls large parts of Iraq and Syria, started its operations in Afghanistan in 2014, coinciding with two major political and security transitions in the country. ISIS also announced its Khurasan province, which includes parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and began recruiting militants under the Khurasan Caliphate flag. Some of the Taliban senior militants have joined the Islamic State group.

The meteoric rise of the Islamic State in Afghanistan in 2014 was another unforeseeable threat to Afghanistan's security. Given all these, Afghanistan has the potential to become a safe haven for ISIS. It is yet to see how the Afghan government will battle the Islamic State in Afghanistan. This is while the current situation has made Afghan citizens more pessimistic about the security situation.

In a far more different approach than in the past, the Taliban launched a comprehensive offensive against Afghan government forces in 2015. They were able to momentarily take control of many districts in Northern and Southern provinces. Moreover, the attack on Arbaki local militias in Jalrez left 30 soldiers dead. Due to insufficient ammunition and no assis-

tance from high-ranking security officials were the main causes of the high casualties of the attack. The Taliban also carried out several offensive and bombing in Kabul.

The rapid deterioration of security in the North was seen an ultimate downfall of Afghanistan's relative security that existed in some parts of the country.

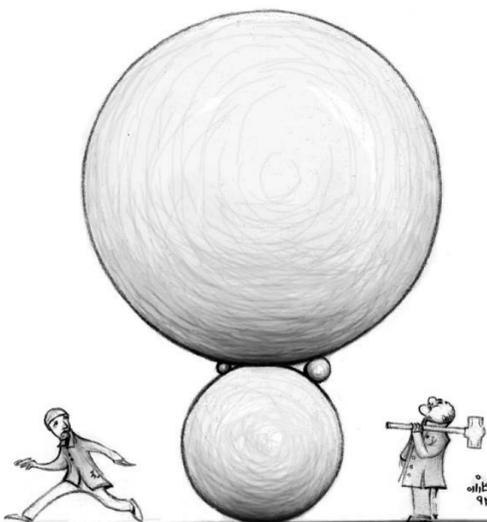
Not to forget, our security forces had countable achievements against the Taliban as well. They took back control of the occupied districts quickly. Also, a number of high-profile leaders of ISIS in Afghanistan including Shahidullah Shahid and Hafiz Saeed were killed in a drone strike in Nangarhar alongside Gul Zaman, ISIS's second in-command, and 49 other insurgents in Achin district of Nangarhar.

The increase in Taliban offensives has many reasons. The cunctation in introducing a National Defence minister and vacancy of this key security post is said to be one of the major causes. The government has suggested 3 figures for this post but none of them were able to pass the parliament's voting. Masoom Stanekzai, nominee for the Defence Ministry post, witnessed an attack on the parliament on the very day of his introduction to the parliament. The MPs in part perceived the attack as his incapability in acquiring the post and rejected him. The national unity government should immediately introduce a new and capable person for this post. The vacancy of this seat has given a rise in rivalry between the generals. This is considerably undermining blood and sweats of the Afghan National Army in the fight against the Taliban. In the meantime, absence of a defense minister has led to poor communications between security officials and the military units stationed sent to the battlefields.

In spite of that, the National Unity Government is pursuing the policy of reaching a peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict with the Taliban. The Taliban, though active on battlegrounds, have been shuttling from Urumqi to Islamabad and to other cities in preparations for peace talks. The first official meeting between the Afghan Taliban and Afghan government was held in Murre, a tourist resort near Islamabad. Mid-ranking Taliban officials including Maulavi Abdul Latif, minister of Agriculture during Taliban, Mohammed Abbas Akhund, Health minister during Taliban and Mullah Yahya participated in the meeting as the representative of the Haqqani network. Representatives from major political parties inside Afghanistan and the Afghan High Peace Council members participated in the meeting. Taliban were told to prepare a list of demands so that both sides may negotiate over them. In the negotiations for a peace deal, the government should protect the achievements of the past decade. Undoubtedly, pursuing the peace process and finding a peaceful solution to the Afghan war is the best option on the table for now.

Lastly, the worsening security has had subduing effects on Afghans. Foreign investors are pulling out of the country. Unemployment is rising; the value of Afghan currency has dropped in the international exchange rate. The popularity of National Unity Government has dropped significantly. The attrition rate of Afghan soldiers is unbelievably high as Afghan soldiers are leaving the army and police ranks. The current state of insecurity in the country is the source of most of the current challenges in Afghanistan. Finding an immediate solution to this dilemma should be government's top priority.

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