

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

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Afghanistan's Saffron – the Best in the World

Afghanistan's saffron has been named as the world's best saffron for the third year, as well. This significant status has been given to Afghanistan by International Taste and Quality Institute in Brussels, the capital of Belgium and is identified through a three star certificate. This award is a remarkable achievement by Afghanistan as the country hears pieces of news related to insecurity and grief mostly. Moreover, it is a good sign at a time when the country is considered as the largest producer of poppy. This means that the country has the opportunity of substituting poppy with saffron.

A study of Afghan agriculture would show the fact that poppy has always been there to threaten Afghan society and satisfy the international demands for drugs. The political uncertainty has played a large role in strengthening the production and business of this dangerous destroyer. Today, the poppy cultivation in Afghanistan can be connected to the system of organized crime and international drug mafia. At the same time, it has proved to be the source that offers financial support to Taliban insurgents. It is a crystal clear fact that the long lasting violence and insurgency of Taliban militants have been highly sponsored by the poppy business.

Besides that, it is also very vital to comprehend that poppy production and its business does not only influence Afghanistan by backing Taliban and bringing bad name to the nation but also by making Afghan people addict to it. It can be easily observed in Afghan society that there are thousands of addicts throughout the country. These addicts do not include the men alone but there are many women and children as well who have been victimized by the curse of drugs. And the most disastrous fact is that the number is swelling and the measures to curtail the situation are non-existent. Though international community on various occasions has hassled Afghan government to control the situation, serious worries still remain regarding any comprehensive and realistic strategy to solve the issue. The institutions in Afghanistan that are given the task of controlling the situation do not have adequate ability and skill to control the situation and most of the times they are unable to take any initiative against the drug mafia who are far more influential and have more control over the situation. One of the key factors that international community has stressed on for continuing the financial support for Afghanistan is extermination of drugs. What will be the strategy of Afghan government regarding controlling this hazard has yet to be seen.

There are different suggestions regarding controlling the poppy production and its spread in Afghanistan. One of the ways is to motivate the farmers not to grow the poppy crops from the very beginning and then there is another tactic that suggests for destroying the crops after they are grown. Both the methods can be useful for curbing the menace of drugs but it is more important to control the situation from the very beginning. Motivating farmers and landlords to grow alternative crops can be one of the best solutions as it is practicable as well and may bring the farmers and landlords profit as well.

One of the alternative crops in this regard can be saffron. Saffron has different advantages as compared to poppy cultivation and among them the most important one is that it does not bring harm to human life, it is legal and does not go against the teachings of Islam. It is one of those crops that have the capability to be grown in dry environment. Moreover, it does not need much irrigation as well. Simple irrigation two or three times a year would do the trick; in that sense, it is draught resistant. Poppy cultivation, in contrast, would require an extensive irrigation plan – six times a year. Saffron has different uses and, in fact, makes life healthier. The common use of saffron can be found in adding flavor to dishes, preparing different types of medicines, hot drinks, appetizers and perfumes. Moreover, it has demand in the international market as well.

According to market studies, the price of one kg of saffron is about USD 3,000 in Afghanistan and regionally it is around USD 6,000; while the international price may even reach to USD 8,000. This shows that it is very lucrative and can be used as one of the basic exports of Afghanistan. It is also important to mention that the demand for saffron is very high both in regional and international markets.

What Afghan authorities and people require in this regard is iron will and determination to change the scenario. Yes, it is right that the producers of drugs have stronghold in our country, but unshakable decision both by government authorities and Afghan people can defeat them. If Afghan society is really interested in controlling the menace of drugs and stopping it from financing terrorism and bringing sufferings and death to common Afghan people through addiction, it has to launch a comprehensive strategy, among which the use of alternative crops can play a vital role. And, among alternative crops saffron can be the most practicable and lucrative.

Political Syndrome

By Hujjatullah Zia

The lurid reports being released by national and international media about Afghanistan bespeaks of political syndrome. Seemingly, this country is in labor for breeding greater challenges. The mounting militancy, corruption and narcotic are highly toxic to social, political and economic issues and foment trouble across the country.

According to recent reports, Afghanistan is world's third largest opium producer after Myanmar and Laos and produces some 90 per cent of world's illicit opiates. An Afghan official said that Mafia and terrorist groups are annually receiving \$70 billion from narcotics in this country and Pakistani Taliban, who carry out acts of terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan, are the beneficiary of \$2 billion. Meanwhile, the US-based non-profit association World Justice Project (WJP) released that Afghanistan is ranked the second-worst country in rule of law after Venezuela from 102 countries.

It is an incontrovertible fact that the Mafia and the Taliban militants gain great financial supports from poppy cultivation, production and smuggling of narcotics. They muddy the water through fomenting racial tensions, abduction, violence and bloodshed to divert the government's attention from anti-narcotic campaigns. In other words, the illicit drugs, which are cultivated in our own land and used against our own people, play a key role in the militants' political life.

The irony is that drugs save life – as the Taliban and Mafia are nourished to continue their political and economic existence. The counterproductive consequence of drugs for the Afghans' sworn enemy is a matter of great concern. It is really painful to think that a large number of people live under poverty line; however the militants use our land in their own interests besides playing a destructive role in the society.

On the other hand, since men's natural and inalienable rights and dignity are trampled upon to a large extent, it will not be a surprise to hear that Afghanistan is the second-worst country in rule of law. It is simply said that might makes right – the very fact is going in our society. Constitutionally, all citizens are equal in the eye of law. As a result, the Constitution of Afghanistan states in article 22 as, "Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law." But practically, the influential individuals are hardly prosecuted despite perpetrating crimes and corruptions.

Last month, the Chief Executive Officer of the National Unity Government (NUG) Abdullah Abdullah said that he was not satisfied with the performance of the government over the past few months, adding that justice was also not being implemented in the judicial

system.

Afghan people suffer from lawlessness and lack of justice on a large scale. For instance, nepotism and bribery is rampant in the state machineries. According to reports, current and former government officials and members of parliament had been able to appoint their relatives to key diplomatic positions at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). Pajhwok Afghan News released that "sons and other close relatives of government officials and members of parliament have been appointed to key posts in Afghanistan's embassies abroad, where a number of embassy staff has sought political asylum". The report also pointed to the safe use of diplomatic passports, saying a majority of the MoFA employees had been issued diplomatic passports for personal journey abroad. Around 4,650 diplomatic passports were issued illegally to the employees, who had been benefitting from privileges in foreign countries even after the expiry of their office terms. Hence, such issues are the main factors to push Afghanistan into the rank of world's second-worst country in rule of law.

In the political and social wheeling and dealing, moral values are in the state of moribund and one is hardly found to listen to the call of his conscience. As a result, both the ideologue and mercenary militants are widely involved in shedding the blood of the innocent individuals on the grounds of exercising their ideology or being paid to do so. The members of Mafia suck the people's blood and ultimately the judicial and administrative systems are deep in the quagmire of corruptions. In such hustle and bustle, the ordinary people are the sacrificial lambs who suffer mentally and physically. To counter terrorism and Mafia, it will be highly effective to debilitate them financially. Since narcotic is a strong financial source for the members of Taliban and Mafia, the role of Ministry of Counter-narcotic is paramount in this regard. Moreover, a strong determination is needed for eradication of narcotic drugs to paralyze the militants and the mercenary fighters. In another item, the failure in counter-terrorism is strongly linked to failure in counter-narcotic strategy. Campaigning against poppy cultivation for a decade, Afghanistan still remains world's third largest opiate producer – producing the 90 per cent of world's illicit opiates. Meanwhile, it "remains very dangerous place", as the U.S. President Barack Obama has recently said, and foreign troops have implied their failure in eradicating the Taliban militants from Afghanistan. So, the parallel move of militancy and narcotic reveals this direct link and it must have been realized by the officials long ago. I believe that narcotic is the backbone of the militants and as far as it is on rise, they will not be defeated. Strategy to curb the said challenges will bear the desired fruit if the officials' put their efforts honestly and discard nepotism, favoritism and corruption.

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The Calls for Approving the EVAW Law

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

A number of women's rights activists in Afghanistan called on approval of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) bill by the Afghan parliament. The activists and civil society representatives said that the approval of the law is critical, and that the failure to pass the law by the parliament would compound the challenges against the Afghan women. The bill is being implemented based on a presidential decree by former president Hamid Karzai issued about six years ago. The law aimed at boosting status of women in Afghanistan was put on the desk for discussions in the parliament in 2013, but due to oppositions from conservative members of the parliament was shelved and efforts for having it approved in the parliament stalled.

Despite considerable progresses for Afghan women in the past fourteen years, there have been setbacks and failures in advancing the rights of the women. The EVAW bill was stalled in the parliament two years as a number of the lawmakers considered some articles of the law against Islamic Sharia. The failure to approve the law by the parliament sparked fears among civil society women rights activists who have been fighting for improving the rights of the women. The conservative lawmakers who hold considerable power in the parliament have staunchly opposed the law. In fact, the failure of the Wolesi Jirga to approve the EVAW bill two years ago was a heavy blow to the efforts for improving women's rights as well as the achievements of the past over a decade.

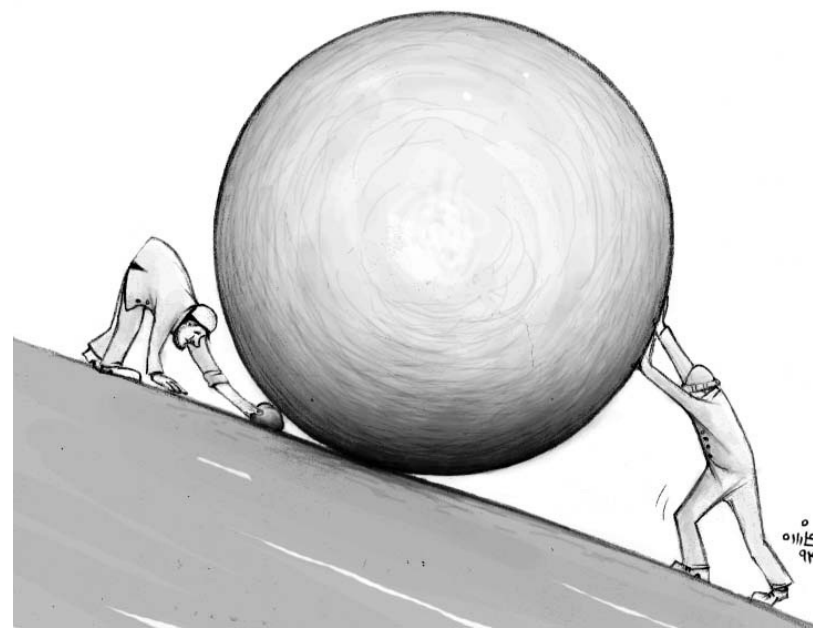
The setbacks in promoting rights of the women in Afghanistan are also attributed to the former administrations' lack of determination in safeguarding the rights of the women. Attempting to appease the ultra-conservative religious figures and scholars, President Hamid Karzai even endorsed a code of conduct issued by Afghan Ulema Council which included some Taliban-era style restrictions on women's daily activities. Given the Afghan government's efforts to open a peace channel with the Taliban, the former president Hamid Karzai had no determination for supporting women's rights particularly approval of the EVAW bill. The lack of commitment from previous governments significantly contributed to the worsening situations for the women in Afghanistan. Afghan legal institutions failed to take further measures for protecting the women by judicial system. Reports suggested that even a department of the Ministry of Justice was considering a bill banning testifying of family members on violence against female family members.

With the efforts for kick-starting peace talks with the Taliban bolstering, there have been concerns over the future of Afghan women. This ongoing insurgency in the country and the government's efforts to reach a peace deal with the Taliban leaves the fate of rights of Afghan women in an increasing uncertainty. Despite assurances from the leaders of the National Unity Government, there are fears that the rights of women may be compromised in peace talks with

the militant groups. During past years of overtures to the Taliban by previous governments, the women have had little presence in the process. However, the government officials have staunchly stressed on empowerment of the women in Afghanistan and preserving the achievements of the past fourteen years.

On the other hand, domestic violence against the women has remained unabated. According to the Afghan human rights commission officials, there is an evident increase in cases of domestic violence against women reported to the government and human rights organizations. On hand, there are still widespread domestic violence against women; but on other hand, it is believed that now more cases of violence against women are reported to judicial and human rights authorities. Lack of capacity in the Afghan legal system, corruption, conservative mindset of the judges are major challenge for helping the women victims of violence and addressing the reported cases of violence against women. Despite the daunting challenges for women, there are also opportunities for enhancing the rights and status of the Afghan women. The most important opportunity in this regards is the presence of the international community. Afghanistan is funded by the international donors and the country is obliged to support the basic rights of its citizens and particularly the women to receive funds from the international community. Given the international pressures, the government of Afghanistan has also been willing to support the EVAW law, but has been reluctant for exerting pressure on the lawmakers to approve the bill. The continued commitment of the international community is working as a shield for protecting the rights of women in Afghanistan. Progresses of women's rights and progress in implementing the EVAW law will contribute to protecting the women of Afghanistan from domestic violence in their daily lives. The law is highly critical not only for the Afghan women but also for the whole Afghan society. Elimination of violence against women would contribute to a more just and secure society. The National Unity Government has so far proved serious in taking the necessary measures for empowerment of the women through promoting women to top-level political and government posts. The government should also act on improving the laws on women's rights and status through pressurizing the parliament. The law is critical for long-term prevention of domestic violence against women in Afghanistan. If the government of Afghanistan and the international community fails to act decisively on women's rights, there are risks of a sudden deterioration of women's status with exacerbation of security and growing conservatism in the country. It is mandatory for all parties to step up efforts for approval of the law on violence against women, and fully implementation of the law on Elimination of Violence Against Women disregard of its approval. Afghanistan's handling of women's rights will determine its success in improving human rights standards in the long term.

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