

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

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The Multi-facet Conflict in Afghanistan

With widespread violence across the country going on, President Ashraf Ghani promised a tough response to the 'imposed war'. Speaking at a joint press conference with his Croatian counterpart, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, he asserted that Afghanistan will not give up to the efforts for sacred peace. He added that the violence in the country is imposed by a number of certain elements including regional factors. President Ghani suggested that resolving the conflict requires not only domestic wise and coherent policies, but also external and regional solution to address what he called external elements of the Afghan conflict. The President's comments is coming after months of efforts for resuming peace negotiations with the militant groups. However, the efforts for bringing the Taliban leaders to table of negotiations have not yielded any tangible results so far.

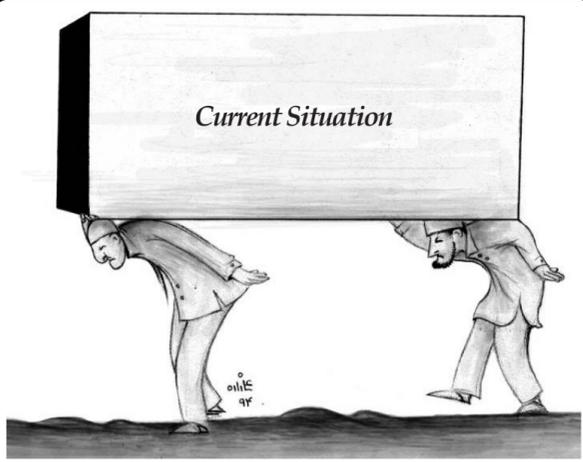
As the insurgency is wreaking havoc in many Northern provinces and elsewhere, hopes for beginning of peace negotiations with the Taliban are getting narrower. Despite his insistence on pursuing peace talks with the Taliban, President Ghani's remarks clearly suggested his government's little progress in the efforts for starting peace talks. Some months ago, the National Unity Government officials hoped the negotiations for peace would start soon. However, the talks did not begin, and the militant groups began their fierce and concerted spring offensive. Despite recent visits of Pakistani officials to Kabul, there are increasing doubts regarding concrete ongoing peace talk success.

With the stalemate going on, the government of Afghanistan is not expected to be able to kick-start peace negotiations with the militants in the near future. This also means that the security challenges that have engulfed the country this year are going to further compound. The concerted military offensive by the Taliban shows that the group is determined to take ground through violence and seek victory through prolonged warfare. The continuation of war further makes the peace efforts unsuccessful. Given this, the government of Afghanistan needs to plan for a prolonged conflict which may not be resolved for years. To win the war, the Afghan government should not derail the anti-insurgency campaign for hopes of resuming peace negotiations with the militants. Any hopes for a short-term peace deal with the Taliban are illusions that would not be helpful for anti-insurgency campaign.

On the other hand, government officials at local level have stated that the Taliban are teaming up with the newly emerging Islamic State group in some areas specifically in Kunduz province. The Islamic State group is believed to be already operating in some areas previously controlled by the Taliban. Previously it was thought that the Taliban were opposing Islamic State group and it was predicted the two groups would confront each other militarily. However, the worrisome reports of cooperation between the IS and the Taliban is suggesting that the issue might turn into a new nightmare for the Afghanistan.

If the Islamic State group joins forces with the Taliban, all past insurgency pattern would change. The Taliban used to observe some critical rules and were less brutal to the civilians compared to the newly emerging Islamic State group. In case of joining forces with the IS in Afghanistan, the Taliban may quickly evolve into a typical insurgent group like terrorist groups in African states and the Arab world who target military and non-combatants alike. In order to prevent the two groups from uniting, the government must launch robust military operations particularly in areas where the Islamic State group is believed to be active. On the other hand, to prevent such a scenario, the government needs to materialize the peace process as quickly as possible.

However, the hopes for bringing the Taliban to table of negotiations have been vanishing in recent months, and this is a very irritating sign for the fate of the Afghan peace process. Given the newly emerging security challenges, the failure to start peace talks with the Taliban would only exacerbate the multi-facet challenges. As President Ghani stated, the government needs to pursue a two-track strategy of war and peace against the insurgent groups. To handle the current chaotic security challenges, the government needs to have a clear definition of the enemy who should be fought militarily. Lack of a clear strategy and a clear government stance on militant groups would not be helpful for the ongoing war against the Taliban and the affiliated groups.



The Imminent Release of the 31 Abductees

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

It is the for the third time that rumors suggest imminent release of the 31 passengers abducted more than two months ago on Kabul-Kandahar highway in Zabul province. Reports suggest efforts have been underway in recent days in Zabul and Ghazni provinces to arrange swap of Taliban prisoners with the 31 abductees. More than two months ago, the 31 passengers, who were returning home from Iran, were selectively abducted allegedly by Islamic State militants on Kandahar-Kabul Highway. Since then, there have been prolonged protests from the civil society community and the families of the abducted passengers. However, most of the back-channel efforts mediated by tribal elders for the release of the passengers have been in vain.

The government also launched a military offensive in Zabul province aiming to release the hostages. However, the operation ended with no result. In fact the military operation virtually closed for a while the communication channels between the Taliban and the government officials through local elders in Zabul and Ghazni provinces. With each day passing, glimpse of hopes for safe release of the passengers had been vanishing. With the stalemate persisting, local elders and inter-ethnic negotiators seemed helpless expressing exhaustion over the situation. In recent weeks, almost everyone was convinced that there was no hope for saving the abducted passengers. However, there are renewed hopes now for imminent release of the hostages as government officials and local influential figures are mediating for the releases.

The possible release of the abductees is seemingly is becoming true as result of the recent silence - as there were no much media coverage and no military offensive for spoiling the efforts - which provided the opportunity for local and tribal negotiators to continue talks with the militants. In the meantime, the lull also discouraged the Taliban-affiliated militants that their demands for releasing their prisoners from the Afghan government's prisons would not be met and their conditions would go ignored by the government. Both the government of Afghanistan and the society went the wrong way in seeking safe release of the passengers. The public uproar aimed at pressurizing the government for negotiating with the hostage takers as well as the military offensive somehow was helpful, but it did have considerable negative impacts on the process of secret negotiations with the militants.

Such environments needs involving kidnapping needs restraints to allow back-door negotiations. This has now made the problem even more complicated. The government was not ready to fulfill demands of the militants, in part for fears of future incidents of this nature. The only and the best option left was communicating with the militants through local and tribal elders and influential figures and seeking safe release of the

passengers through tribal politics. The bigger problem with the incident was that the government was not acting transparently regarding the issue and development of the consequent negotiations between the militants and government or local negotiators. Government officials put the public in dark over the issue, and inefficiently let public know about the demands of the militants. Since the beginning, the issue has been engulfed with a lot of ambiguities. It remained a mystery whether who is behind the abduction. There are different accounts of the militants responsible for the kidnapping. When negotiating with local elders and government interlocutors, the militants was claimed to have made demands to the government and local mediators, including asking for handing a vehicle full of ammunition seized by security forces. This was suggesting the Taliban was responsible for the abduction as the vehicle allegedly belonged by Taliban. There were also claims from local people and government officials that the perpetrators are affiliated with Islamic State group, or the so-called Daesh. This was while some local sources denied involvement of the IS group in the kidnapping.

What is clear so far is that the abduction is not carried out solely by the Islamic State group. The reason for this is that if it was the Islamic State group, it would definitely harm the passengers for making their demands met. The Taliban militants or at least some local commanders of the group who shifted loyalty to the Islamic State have been responsible for the kidnapping of the 31 civilians. Despite that the Taliban denied being involved in the abduction, there were evidences and assertions from the local residents the group is in some way behind the kidnapping. With Islamic State group emerging in some Taliban-controlled areas of the south and east, it is a possibility that foreign militants are also involved in the kidnapping along the local Zabuli Taliban.

As a swap deal is shaping, all involved parties need to be vigilant and careful not to spoil the opportunity that is being seized after a long time. Any rush, uproar or mishandling of the swap deal will ruin the chance of the releasing the passengers from Taliban captivity. In an immature way, the government officials in the field of negotiating with the militants have leaked the still-developing process of negotiations with the militants for making a prisoner swap possible. This is really putting the whole process in danger and it may abruptly end with any success as there are genuine possibilities for failure. In addition, families of the abductees are in pain and agony as they follow all rumors on the development of the hostage taking. If unsuccessful, such premature announcements could ruin their morale and compound their agony.

Hopefully, this time there may be a real chance for releasing the hostages. The local negotiators and government officials in Ghazni and Zabul must remain vigilant and handle the process soundly. If this opportunity is spoiled, there may not another chance for releasing the 31 abductees.

Abdul Ahad Bahrami is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at ahad.bahrami@gmail.com

Doomed to Cruel Fate

By Hujjatullah Zia

She can no more confide her pains and secrets to her friends by means of words, but through tearful eyes. What she can do is to reflect her bleeding wounds and convey her dolorous messages via shedding bitter tears. She was born in the patriarchal land - where women and girls are doomed to cruel fate. It was not the mark of a golden necklace under her chin but of a villain's keen knife - who sinisterly plotted to kill her in cold blood.

Gul Seema, a hapless bride, survived a fatal act of violence. The thick stains of blood on her lapel and the stab wounds on her throat revealed the bestiality of a misogynist. Her words were stifled for the whole life; however, the slash shows that the perpetrator intended to slaughter her on the spot. Furthermore, she was forced by her husband to swallow a pin - perhaps to show her death natural.

In a report 'Their lives on the Line', the human rights watchdog urged the Afghan government to meet its obligations to ensure gender equality and address discriminatory social attitudes. Amnesty International said the authorizes are doing nothing to prevent the escalation of violence - including sexual assault, threats and even assassinations - especially against women's rights defenders.

According to Salil Shetty, Amnesty International's Secretary General, the lack of protection is "simply shocking." He told journalists that "Women human rights defenders from all walks of life have fought bravely for some significant gains over the past 14 years - many have even paid their lives. It's outrageous that Afghan authorities are leaving them to fend for themselves, with their situation more dangerous than ever." The statement is based upon 50 interviews collected by the watchdog's researchers with women's rights defenders as well as their relatives across the country.

While the international community has already spent hundreds of millions of dollars into projects that aim to support women in Afghanistan, now it seems these achievements are at risk. The publication is indeed rather timely. It follows some high-profile cases of abuse and violence.

On March 19, a mob of men beat a 27-year-old woman named Farkhunda to death, threw her body off a roof, ran over it with a car, set it on fire and at the end, threw it into the Kabul River. The attack was captured by mobile phone cameras and was widely shared on social media. The woman had been falsely accused of burning a Holy Koran. Her death led to massive protests across the country, 26 arrests and renewed calls for authorities to ensure that women are protected from violence in Afghanistan. Four of the perpetrators have been sentenced to death in primary court, but 18 were exonerated for having no documents available against them - the human rights' activists in the

country urge the court to revise its decision regarding the 18 who were proved innocent.

In 2011, a Thomson Reuters Foundation poll called Afghanistan as the most dangerous place in the world for women.

Since then little seems to have changed. Afghan women rights defenders continue their work placing their lives constantly on the line. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan women have made significant advances in rights, with millions of girls attending schools and women holding government posts. But with the steady withdrawal of foreign forces and the Taliban insurgency still resilient, there are growing fears the gains will be lost. "Afghanistan is facing an uncertain future, and is at arguably the most critical moment in its recent history. Now is not the time for international governments to walk away," Shetty said.

Despite the progress made, women's struggle for civic and human rights still has a long way to go. Three decades of war has left many Afghans both eager for change and afraid of it. There are still many instances of ordinary women experiencing domestic violence, being sexually abused, or being forced into marriage. Women in senior leadership roles - such as in parliament or the police - are still being murdered. Some men feel threatened by the presence of women in senior positions. These men see women's rights as the "westernization" of Afghan culture.

In the patriarchal society of Afghanistan, women are expected to adopt a second position. Traditionally, they have to endure the bitterness of life without a word of protest. Their husbands are their full-authorized masters who can always order them around and treat them as slaves.

Honor killings are a common form of violence against women across our country. Women are killed for reasons such as refusing to enter an arranged marriage, being in a relationship that is disapproved by their relatives, attempting to leave a marriage, becoming the victim of rape, dressing in ways which are deemed inappropriate, etc.

The violence against women can occur in both public and private spheres of life and at any time of their life span. Many women are terrified by these threats of violence and this essentially has an impact on their lives that they are impeded to exercise their human rights, for instance, the fear for contribution to the development of their communities socially, economically and politically.

Reports says that most women do not seek legal assistance for domestic or sexual abuse for fear of prosecution or being returned to their family or the perpetrator or because they don't know their rights. It is hoped that women's rights and dignity be held in respect. They will not be considered as second class citizen or treated as an object. Since women form the society's half population, they play a highly integral role in case of being provided the opportunity otherwise half of the society will be paralyzed.

Hujjatullah Zia is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at zia_hujjat@yahoo.com

Chairman / Editor in Chief: Dr. Hussain Yasa

Vice Chairman: Kazim Ali Gulzari

Phone: +93 799 005 019/799 408 271/777 005 019

E-mail: mail@outlookafghanistan.com, outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Address: V-137, Street 6, Phase 4, Shahrak Omeed Sabz, Kabul, Afghanistan

Sub Office: Shora Road, Street 10, District 6, Kartey 3, Kabul, Afghanistan

