

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



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Public Transportation in Kabul: A Challenge That Calls For Urgent Attention of the Government

Transportation is certainly an indispensable catalyst for activating and stimulating the speed of economic, social, political and strategic development in any society. Therefore, effective and efficient functioning of urban centers depends on the provision of basic infrastructures, including transportation infrastructure. This implies that transport infrastructure has to be rationally developed to ensure that movement of people and goods takes place accessibly, speedily, economically, safely, comfortably and in an environmentally-friendly manner in the country, especially in the major cities including Kabul as the capital city of Afghanistan. Whether transport infrastructure is rationally or strategically developed, the benefits could only be optimized if it promotes a sustainable transport system that guarantees safe, reliable, efficient and environmentally-friendly movement of people and goods. Such transportation infrastructures must overcome the different transportation challenges including congestion monster that bedevils urban centers globally i.e. congestions of people, houses and traffic. Among different impacts of lack of viable transportation system, we can point to their magnitudes that affect the national psyche. And based on research findings, there is a direct relation between violence and national psyche that its symptoms and consequences are clearly in the social behavior urban residents, and especially of Kabul with more than five million residents.

Lack of an accessible, affordable, safe and secure, clean and environmentally friendly transportation system is one of the biggest challenges of Kabul city. Kabul Municipality claims that it has developed Kabul comprehensive transportation plan including developing the standard infrastructures for buses, improving urban service management, and provision of standardized transportation service to the citizens and has taken concrete steps to implement them. KM also claims that it has identified Kabul transportation problems with the cooperation of government and international stakeholders and has developed specific plans to address them. According to KM authorities, lack of standard bus stations, lack of bus stops, electronic traffic facilities in the cross roads and streets, weak implementation of traffic law, violation of law by the warlords and other powerful people, weak cooperation between the relevant institutions of urban transportation, lack of standard roads in Kabul, too many T-walls and barriers and lack of the public information about urban order are the main transportation challenges that Kabul is faced with them.

Unrealistic Pledges have Disappointed People

Kabul Municipality and other relevant authorities have repeatedly made pledges that they would bring fundamental changes in the transportation infrastructures of Kabul city. However, they have not been able to deliver their promises. As a result, the people are disappointed with the promises in terms of improving the transportation infrastructures. At the same time, Ministry of Transportation has newly revealed a plan providing improved transportation facilities for women by mobilizing 20 buses driven by female bus drivers and also providing cheap transportation service to the students. As people are fed up with the unrealistic pledges, the Ministry of Transport shall have calculated its initiatives very well and shall have planned them based on the realistic resources available in order to realize them in practice. Kabul citizens hope that these initiatives will not have the same fate as the "first metro bus" that the Kabul Municipality promised to build it last year.

Lastly, the previous pledges in terms of developing and renewing Kabul transportation infrastructures, remind us that urban transport projects can only be successful if they are: Comprehensive: projects should address land use-transport integration and promote multi-modal integration. Continuous: plans, planning data, and tools have to be updated on a regular basis. Cooperative: all stakeholders need to be involved, which requires a solid communications plan and stakeholder analysis. Connected: projects should align with long-term transport and urban development plans. Championed: support and ownership at the highest political level are instrumental. Incremental: flexibility in the design is important as it allows project teams to scale up interventions incrementally, if and when needed.

Weak transportation infrastructure is one of the biggest challenges that Kabul is faced with it. It wastes the time and resources of the government and the people. Research findings show it is one of the main causes of national psyche in the country that Recovery can take decades. As a result, the Afghan government shall take the necessary and practical steps to address it accordingly. Because it is not only an indispensable catalyst for activating and stimulating the speed of economic, social, political and strategic development in any society but it also is one the fundamental rights of the Afghan citizens as well.



AFGHANISTAN: Way Forward (Part 1)

By Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

PRELUDE:
As the withdrawal of international coalition forces led by United States of America in Afghanistan in 2014 is set firm, western, regional and local political and regional strategists and planners have been prolifically producing views and opinions about the future of Afghanistan - with majority of them casting doubt on the ability of Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) to protect the country from falling back into the grip of Taliban and other insurgent groups - including Al-Qaeda. But looking at facts and figures based on the past decade of efforts exerted - both by international community and Afghans themselves - we should not ignore the many sparks of possibilities and opportunities that could be fanned into flames of achievements, development, progress and stability in this country - notwithstanding mountains of challenges such as rampant corruption, absence of governance, absence of strong institutions, monopoly of power by certain warlords across the country, absence of economic planning and support and security for investors and businessmen, that still exist.

HISTORIC RETROSPECTIVE:

It might be true that Afghanistan throughout its more than 5000 years known history has gone through turmoil and disturbances, but we have cases in point where certain mechanisms and political tactics worked to maintain stability, achieve progress and development in all fronts - including education, economy and security. A vivid example is the more than 50 years of recent stability that Afghanistan witnessed during the era of Musesabehab that started early 20th century till 1979 when socialist forces with active involvement of ex-USSR overturned the last government of Musesabehab under Sardar Muhammad Daud Khan.

The present debacle is bequeathed in larger part due to conflicting interests of the outside powers rather than something attributable to the Afghans themselves. During the era of USSR intervention in Afghanistan in the 80s, stability could not be achieved due to rivalries between USSR and USA - with Pakistan and Iran playing regional proxy warfare with hidden and vested interests in Afghanistan, which is now very much at play creating obstacles on the way to stability and political settlement. Violent extremism and religious bigotry were something unknown and alien to Afghans before the war against USSR in the 80s. But during the war against ex-USSR when millions of Afghans took refuge to Pakistan and Iran, CIA and ISI of Pakistan have allowed such religious sentiments foster among Afghan and external fighters from other countries - especially Arabs - in order to give motion and excitement to the fighters that were trained, supported with ammunition and money and sent inside Afghanistan to carry out guerilla attacks against the socialist Afghan government forces and Russian red army.

The commonality of interest between Osama bin Laden, his organization - Al-Qaeda - and the ongoing international, western backed campaign to join forces in the war against ex-USSR in Afghanistan caused CIA to tacitly agree with Osama bin Laden to establish parallel organizational structure and channels to those ones created by CIA and ISI, to garner resources and manpower in support of ongoing war against ex-USSR in Afghanistan in the mainly Arab Muslim world. These parallel structures (CIA-ISI and Al-Qaeda) produced good short term, synergic results until the USSR red army left Afghanistan. But these organizations (Al-Qaeda and others) were left intact after the defeat of USSR in Afghanistan. The United States had withdrawn all out support at once from Afghanistan and left that country with her destiny at stake and exposed to hostile countries such as Pakistan with historic territorial disputes with Afghanistan, and Iran with vested interest in that country. At this time (1992 when the last Russian Tank left Afghanistan), the government of Dr. Najeebullah in Kabul was still in power and institutions were still intact. The government in Kabul extended overtures and offered hand of friendship to Pakistan and to the many Jehadi organizations to join negotiation for the formation of all-inclusive government in Afghanistan. This was not allowed by Pakistan - realizing her interest and future influence in Afghanistan at stake - and continued to support the existing Jehadi organizations. This caused complete annihilation and destruction of Afghanistan's institutions including army, police, education and intelligence. The nation and the country were hijacked by less than 50000 armed men belonging to various organizations, which were fostered

in Iran and Pakistan during the war against ex-USSR. With no system, institutions and defense mechanism in place, Afghanistan was turned into no man's land and forces belonging to various Jehadi organizations started fighting over power in the capital. Disaster loomed large and more than 50000 innocent civilians including women and children were killed. This intrinsic war was at full play when Taliban appeared on the scene with support of Pakistan's ISI. Within a matter of two years, Taliban captured Kabul and established ultra-orthodox religious government in the country. This was effectively an invasion by Pakistan as recruits and training of the students (Taliban) were carried out in Pakistan. After the Taliban came in power in Kabul, Al-Qaeda got its niche in the country with much influence over Taliban government. Then came in the incident of 9/11 when United States decided to retaliate against Al-Qaeda and Taliban who harbored Al-Qaeda. By November 2001, Taliban were ousted from Power in Kabul and the stage was set for international military force led by United States. After the United States toppled Taliban government in 2001 the focus was to chase the enemy and find Osama bin Laden, dismantle his network of warriors and to destroy his terrorist organization in Afghanistan and across the world. In the meantime a parallel effort was undergoing - though with much lesser attention and interest - to establish a central government in Kabul based on the outcome of a conference in Bonn, Germany in 2001 immediately after the Taliban were toppled. Efforts were put on to stabilize Afghanistan after the conference in Bonn decided to rally around a government in Kabul under the leadership of Mr. Hamid Karzai. In the beginning it looked as if the process of political rehabilitation of Afghanistan was on track. All main players were led in oblivion to the very stark realities of vested interests of regional players - especially Pakistan who invested immense efforts and resources to keep their step in the future set up of Afghanistan - of course at the cost of Afghan nation. This rivalries among regional players - including India, Pakistan and the neighbors in the Northern sphere of Afghanistan - fractured the process of political rehabilitation, hence Taliban were regrouped in an unprecedented manner by ISI in Pakistan. They started attacking NATO - sometimes in a group of 400 people from across the border in Pakistan in to Afghanistan. Other intelligence agencies operating in Afghanistan for other regional powers have also contributed and have done considerable damages in the form of bringing into power small groups in Kabul. The office of the President has become a symbolic figure with no real executive power in any of the provinces - including the capital Kabul. All those small armed groups who were actively involved in the civil war before Taliban and during the reign of Taliban were supported. These groups formed their strong holds in their respective provinces across Afghanistan and aggressively pursued power in Kabul. In order to avoid visible disturbances in the so called on-going process of formation of a system of governance in Afghanistan, the President and his advisors entrenched these groups in the government - allocating positions as Ministers, deputy ministers, provincial governors and advisors. Not much time was passed when the ecstasy for the new era in Afghanistan on the part of common Afghans or silent majority began to disappear. War intensified, corruption became rampant in the government, compounding the misery of a nation who had hardly took a sigh of relief after more than a decade of civil war in the country. Things went awry wrong when US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Doctor Zalmi Khalilzad, was pulled out of Afghanistan and assigned with a new role as the US Ambassador in Iraq. With formidable and deeply rooted knowledge of Afghanistan, his political history and a strong administrative ability, Ambassador Khalilzad had delivered a great deal of improvements in the ongoing process of stabilization and political rehabilitation in the country. On the military fronts, the campaign was strong and generals were only to pursue the pre-planned agendas against the enemy. Ambassador Khalilzad provided equal and parallel efforts to stabilize the country. Being Afghan-American, Ambassador Khalilzad was very well placed to deliver the promises of international community to the people of Afghanistan in accordance with the wishes of ordinary Afghans. But immediately after his departure from political and diplomatic scene in Afghanistan, things took a turn for the worst - as mentioned in the foregoing paragraph.

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Fate of over 4 million Bengalis in Assam uncertain!

By Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury

Recently published citizen list in the Indian state of Assam has already pushed the fate of over four million Bangla-speaking residents into total uncertainty. This bid of creating a fresh citizen list was aimed at identifying the 'illegal immigrants' and cancel their citizenship. Although the Indian government did not disclose who are those 'illegal immigrants' but the list was done with the motive of pushing-in this large number of Indian nationals into Bangladesh territory. During 2014 general election, Bharatiya Janata Part made pledge of driving-away the illegal Bangla speaking residents from Assam.

The case of illegal immigrants has been a long-time political issue in Assam, the north eastern state in India. According to critics and political analysts, the ruling parties in Assam had accorded citizenship to hundreds and thousands of Bangladeshis through forged documents with the goal of increasing their vote bank. Following such illegal trend, a six-year long student movement came to an end through the signing of the 'Assam Pact' in 1985. Main point in the 'Assam Pact' signed between the students organizations and the government, was to ascertain a deadline and whoever had entered that deadline would be treated as illegal immigrants. Accordingly, 24th March 1971 was marked as the deadline. Following the signing of the Assam Pact, section 6A was added in the Indian constitution of 1955 and was mentioned that anyone entering Assam after March 24, 1971 would be considered as illegal immigrants.

A writ petition was moves with the Indian Supreme Court in 2012 challenging the 6A section. Verdict into this writ was pronounced in 2014 in a double-bench of the Supreme Court. In this verdict, the court had given a specific timeframe to the Indian government to complete the preparation of the citizen's list under the supervision of the Supreme Court.

During the electoral campaign in 2014, Narendra Modi, the big boss of the Bharatiya Janata Party told a rally that he would drive away illegal Bangladeshis from Assam with 'bag and baggage'. In the verdict, the Indian Supreme Court also termed the illegal immigrants in Assam as Bangladeshis.

Following this verdict, Indian policymakers had taken several precaution-

ary measures in stopping the illegal inflow of Bangladeshi nationals to India by sealing the bordering areas and increasing security measures. Indian media also are terming the illegal immigrants in Assam as Bangladeshis.

Indian policymakers say, the issue of illegal inflow of Bangladeshi nationals to Indian state of Assam had never been raised by India in any of the bilateral talks. The issue even did not come in the diplomatic interchange between the two friendly nations. But, Bangladeshi policymakers on several occasions had clearly mentioned that the illegal immigrants in Assam or any part of India are not Bangladeshis. Bangladesh claims, after 1971, no one had gone to India from Bangladesh.

As because India did not raise the issue officially with Bangladesh, there had never been a word during any of the Bangladesh-India talks from the Bangladeshi side on this issue. But, experts say, the silence of the Bangladesh side on the matter and this crucial issue would ultimately be counterproductive. This would ultimately turn into another major problem for Bangladesh, similar to that of the current Rohingya refugee crisis.

In 2017, a union minister in Assam, Hemant Biswas Sharma had clearly told the media that the process of registering the citizen in Assam is aimed at identifying the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and sending them back to their 'own country'. In June 2018, United Nations Human Rights Commission wrote a letter to the Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj asking the fate of those people who would be excluded from the list prepared by the Indian authorities.

According to political analyst, the case centering expulsion of over four million people from Assam and pushing them into Bangladesh territory would not only create a tremendous headache for the Bangladeshi government, it would also bitter the existing relations between Dhaka and New Delhi. They said, India definitely has the right to identify the illegal immigrants but they should not unilaterally push them into Bangladesh.

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