

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



September 25, 2016

Preserving Cultural Heritage

Afghanistan is one of the countries that is blessed with mineral resources and historical monuments. However, it has not been able to benefit much from both of them. The historical and cultural sites and monuments have not been preserved well and there are serious concerns about them as the insecurity, instability and government negligence seem to be on the rise.

Bamyan is one of the provinces in Afghanistan that is known worldwide for historic Buddha statues that were believed to be carved out thousands of years ago. However, the people of Afghanistan have not been very much careful about them. Recently cultural activists in the province have voiced out their concerns that the historic sites are in dilapidated condition and government authorities are negligent about their protection and maintenance. They warn if proper attention is not paid, the sites may extinct.

Ali Raza Hussaini, a cultural activist, claims that heavy rains, natural disasters and the lack of maintenance and care has caused damages to historic sites in the province and the sites face the danger of extinction. He said in a statement, "The Qul Akram locality where some ancient caves exist is registered with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO, but local residents keep their household animals in the carves."

Moreover, to make things worse the local officials claim that the number of tourists declined in recent years due to growing insecurity in Bamyan and neighboring provinces. It is unfortunate to note that the government response in this regard is really disappointing.

The government authorities fail to understand that the initiatives to safeguard Afghanistan's cultural and historical heritage are really important for the feeling of national splendor in the members of Afghan society, which at the moment are non-existent. The cultural heritage and historical treasure can play a tremendous role in uplifting national sentiments. However, it is also a fact that many years of civil wars and clashes have had severe impacts on Afghanistan's socio-political scenario.

These wars and clashes have influenced the country in so many different ways. There have not been losses only in life and blood but in culture, tradition and values, as well. It is believed that for a civilization to flourish, it is necessary that there should be peace, tranquility and stability. Unfortunately Afghanistan has suffered in this regard.

Though there has been relative peace and stability and there have been efforts to reestablish the Afghan society after the downfall of Taliban, a lot more has to be achieved to make a real difference in the society. It is necessary, at the present scenario, that Afghanistan must have a sense of national integration and harmony.

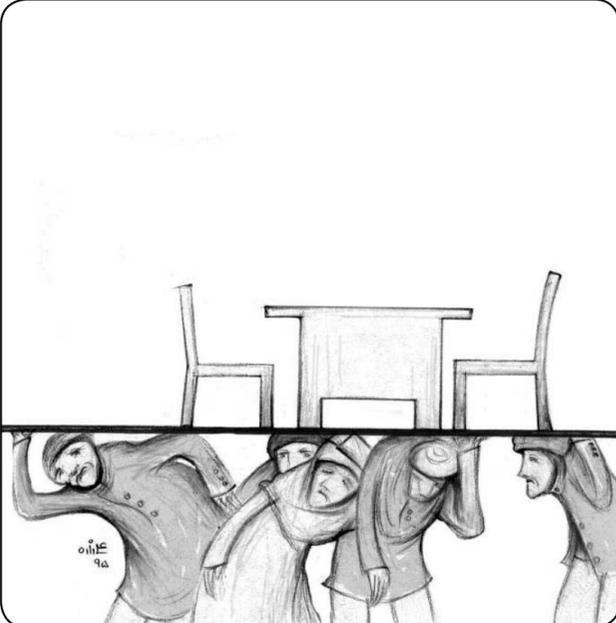
It must be reiterated for the people of Afghanistan that they once had a rich culture and civilization and they had times in their history that knew nothing of violence and terrorism and a relatively peaceful and rich civilization flourished on their land.

Moreover, this should be insisted for them that they have to preserve the traces and remains of their rich history that should help the new generations realize the worth of their history and tradition. Unfortunately such insistence is very rare to see in the society where most of the discussions are centered on clashes and terrorism.

It is really unfortunate to find that the members of Afghan society themselves have not been very much careful about the rich traditional remains and artifacts. There have been culprits even from within Afghan authorities who have been involved in the filthy business of selling their traditional treasures. It is impossible to imagine that the artifacts that are sold illegally could reach to the Black Market without the support of the responsible authorities. Moreover, the instability and the absence of a particular system to take care of such treasure also help in their smuggling.

It is truly tragic to note that Taliban, during their rule in the country, played a negative role regarding the preservation of the rich Afghan tradition. The destruction of the Buddha of Bamyan in this regard was clear indication that Taliban had not respect for the historical wealth and they considered them to be the remains of the non-Islamic civilization. However, they forgot the fact that they depicted the truth about the history of Afghanistan and they also depicted a more peaceful and tranquil era.

Though it may seem contradictory, the foreigners have been more helpful for Afghanistan to keep alive its tradition and history and have assisted Afghanistan in this regard to a great extent. International community and international organizations have made efforts every now and then to safeguard the cultural heritage of Afghanistan and at the same time attract the investors and visitors for their revival and promotion. On the other hand, the insensitive attitude of the Afghan authorities themselves is unfortunate and requires to change quickly. It can never neglect such issues, particularly at a time when the country requires a strong integration to stand on its own as a nation.



A Dose of Solution to Economic Crisis

By Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Unfortunately the Afghan governments have never been able to optimally exploit the economic potential resources and opportunities have in hand. The long term insecurities, bad governance and administrative corruptions not only threaten the economic arteries of the country but also disheartened economic investment in the country. In economics, hope and faith coexist with great scientific pretension and also a deep desire for respectability which has entirely disappeared. In fact, Afghanistan has been ravaged by decades-long political conflicts that have left it economically depressed, but the country also holds a potentially huge natural resource base. Some estimates have put the value of the resources – copper, gold, coal, oil, gas, industrial minerals, rare earth minerals and more – between \$1 trillion and \$3 trillion. If those resources can be extracted and sold legitimately, they could help the country recover from decades of violence and allow the people to reap the rewards of their considerable natural assets. The sizable mineral and energy resources awaiting exploitation bring the possibility of thousands of new jobs and great wealth enhancement in a chronically wage-starved country.

Afghanistan abounds with untouched economic resources. In the 1970s, Soviet geologists first described the rich resources of Afghanistan. They focused on hydrocarbons – gas, oil and coal – and cooper to a lesser extent, as well as industrial mineral resources such as limestone cement and clays. However, little development of these resources occurred before war broke out with the Soviet Union in 1979. Virtually nothing happened in the decades following that war. Then, after the start of the U.S. conflict in Afghanistan in 2001, geologists from academia (including myself), the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the British Geological Survey, and some other geologists from NATO member countries obtained and translated old Soviet geological reports and went into the field when it was safe enough.

Over the course of the last decade, we have filled in more details of the country's resource picture; we have found that Afghanistan's reserves are considerably more robust than previously thought. The USGS deduced that three times more undiscovered gas and 18 times more oil exists, and that potentially extensive coal resources may exist as well. Other large copper prospects discovered recently join the major known copper prospect, called the Aynak; together these deposits have the potential to bring in tens of billions of dollars. Some of these prospects, such as one in Balkh Province, could come online in less than five years. A copper and gold deposit in Ghazni Province is estimated to be worth \$30 billion and may be capable of production within one to two years. Gold deposits elsewhere are also worth billions and should be able to come online in several years. The value of lithium reserves from evaporate deposits in Herat, Ghazni, Nimruz and Farah provinces could exceed \$60 billion;

initial production could occur within one year, with large-scale production two to four years later. And rare earth deposits in Helmand Province are valued at \$89 billion.

Development to date has been limited mostly to construction of roads and a few new buildings, along with refurbishment of factories destroyed during decades of conflict, but progress has gradually declined due to corruptions and increase of war. To avert the risk of a potentially corrupt bureaucracy, new regulatory mechanisms were enacted. The government and its international partners have stressed adherence to newly written resource laws, and to the extractive industries transparency initiatives (EITI), in the hopes of controlling corruption. These measures seek to help Afghanistan escape the so-called resource curse – wherein violent struggles over the control of rich resources, such as the blood diamonds of Africa, outweigh the benefits of a country's raw capital.

In addition, the agricultural sector will continue to be the main contributor to growth, accounting for a quarter of GDP. Agriculture is the country's main employer and 80% of the population depends on this sector. Opium production (90% of world production) is admittedly illegal, but could increase because it is highly profitable (representing about 4% of GDP). The country, which already has an arid climate, could be hit by severe drought especially as water resources are limited. Despite one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world (194th out of 213 countries according to the World Bank), household consumption levels will remain high, explained in part by revenues drawn from opium production and modest inflation relative to the 2003-2012 decade. The authorities have drawn up an action plan targeting several sectors of the economy (water management, creation of jobs outside the agricultural sector, etc.) in order to diversify and strengthen the economy. However, the lack of resources, weak governance and the country's security situation impede the operational realization of the plan's objectives. In the short and medium term, activity will depend on the authorities' ability to implement the necessary reforms (especially at fiscal level), to maintain the level of international aid and strengthen security. Afghanistan has enough economic potentialities such as: mines, agriculture, transportation, industries, business, and etc to end the long-term dreadful economic crisis. In order to successfully exploit them Afghanistan sturdily needs security, efficient economic strategies and adopting peaceful policies against regional and international countries. There is also need of strongly fight against terrorist, opium, corruptions, discrimination and support private sectors as well learn from the similar experience encountered by other countries. The major economic operations must be monitored by credible agencies to avoid corruption, ethnic competition and other problems.

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The Controversy over Peace Talks

By Hujjatullah Zia

Peace talks have been a serious challenge for Afghan administration and came to a standstill in one way or another. The Taliban outfits played a deceptive game and assassinated the head of High Peace Council (HPC) Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani on September 20, 2011 under the terms of negotiation. Moreover, the Taliban fighters continued their militancy and inflicted heavy casualties upon Afghan nation despite the reconciliation process.

With the revelation of the Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Omar's demise and the death of his successor Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was killed in a US drone strike, the peace negotiation reached a deadlock. Following the appointment of Haibatullah Akhundzada as Mansour's successor, the Taliban orchestrated deadly attacks and intensified their Omari Operation – announced earlier by Mansour – from across the border. After all, Mansour's death led to the termination of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) featuring Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the United States as Pakistani officials condemned the strike and called it violation of its territory. In short, peace talks were proved abortive and the militancy increased to a great extent.

With the escalation of insurgency in Afghanistan, the Afghan-Pak relations soured and the heads of National Unity Government (NUG) talked in serious tone against Pakistan at NATO summit in Warsaw and believed that Pakistan divided the Taliban into good and bad terrorists. Addressing the United Nation General Assembly (UNGA), the Second Vice President Sarwar Danish also said that the Afghan government wanted the US to mount pressure on Islamabad to eliminate terrorist sanctuaries on its soil and bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Since the Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders were killed on Pakistan's soil, Afghan officials and political pundits believe that the Taliban enjoy safe havens across the border and stage fatal attacks against the nation.

It comes as US Secretary of State John Kerry, commended Pakistan's fight against terrorism few days back, and said that Islamabad and Kabul had a shared interest in peace and security in the region. He added that terrorist infrastructure had been dismantled and they were on the run because of the action taken by Pakistani forces.

In addition, Pakistan's Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz said, last month, that Pakistan believed that a politically negotiated settlement through an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process was the most viable option for achieving durable peace in the war-torn country. Addressing a reception hosted by the Afghan ambassador on his country's Independence Day, he said, "Pakistan desires durable peace in Afghanistan and seeking close cooperative relations with Af-

ghanistan have always been a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy". Hence, Pakistani officials constantly remarked peace negotiation as viable option for a bona fide peace in Afghanistan – which never came to fruition and brought no changes to Taliban's strategy towards the country.

Now, Afghan government has signed a peace deal with Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – which has triggered a mixed reaction among the nation. A large number of people, including political pundits, express pessimistic opinions about the issue and believe that peace deal with HIA will not mitigate the insurgency and Hekmatyar does not carry much weight since his party has been undermined by the Taliban fighters. The cyberspace is replete with hateful rhetoric against HIA and the militancy and deadly attacks carried out by its fighters leading to heavy casualties. Human Rights Watchdog has also called the peace deal with this party disrespect to human rights adding that it will catalyze the culture of impunity.

However, the officials deem it a fruitful outcome of the government and HPC's struggles and hope for a decline in insurgency. Expressing optimism in a meeting with US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Olson in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA, Sarwar Danish said that the peace deal with HIA was a legal and basic demand of the government and people. He also welcomed HIA's assurance to cut ties with militant outfits and dismantle its armed wing.

The fact is that reaching a peace deal with HIA will not resolve the political challenges and warring parties, mainly the Taliban who pose the most serious threat to the country, will continue their militancy unabated and casualties will not decline. Perhaps the reason behind this deal for HIA is seeking immunity, after carrying out deadly attacks, and a political authority in the NUG will be most welcome.

Overall, if HIA vows to accept and practice upon Afghanistan's Constitution, stop acts of violence and uphold democracy, the peace agreement will be a positive step – though it will not resolve the political challenges, dismantling an armed wing is a move toward peace. Similarly, it reveals the fact that the door for peace talks is open for any warring parties and Afghanistan is a peace-maker. To strengthen the nascent democracy and uphold the rights and liberty of the nation, Afghan officials sought peace with strong determination and made sacrifices to bring warring factions to the negotiating table. Although talks with the Taliban came to a standstill and Afghan-Pak relations hit rock bottom, Afghan officials still hope that Pakistan will nudge the Taliban to come to peace table. It will be highly constructive for Kabul and Islamabad to seek common grounds rather than continuing the blame game.

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