

The Afghan crisis: Are we aware of its ramifications?

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THE massive US military operations in Afghanistan since October 7 have given rise to another complex humanitarian crisis for the international community to deal with. If not checked soon, it may surpass, in extent and intensity, all those that befell the beleaguered people of that hapless country in the past 20 years. And it may also lead to further deepening of the political crisis that has engulfed the world since the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11.

However justified may be the military attacks against the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan, for their role in harbouring and assisting Osama bin Laden, it is the ordinary citizens of Afghanistan who have to bear the brunt of it all. They have been doing so for the last two decades when both internecine warfare and external aggression left more than a million dead, exiled a third of the total Afghan population and caused destitution and homelessness of millions of others in their own country. As a group, the Afghans have perhaps suffered more pain and deprivation than any other group of people for such a long period of time. Their renewed suffering pains me personally because of my long involvement with them as a UN civil servant.

It is about two years since I retired from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). During my career with the organization for almost quarter of a century, I had the opportunity to work for refugees in many parts of the world. A significant part of it related to the Afghanistan situation. In the last four years of my career (mid-1995 to mid-1999), Afghanistan became one of my main preoccupations in my capacity as the Regional Director for Central Asia, South West Asia, North Africa and the Middle East (CASWANAME), based at Headquarters in Geneva. It is a vast region, containing some of the most complex trouble spots of the world, including Iraq, particularly its Kurdish northern region, Palestine, Western Sahara, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. It produced and hosted some of the largest refugee populations in the world. The largest of the refugee groups was the Afghans, numbering more than six millions at one point. It was during my time as the Director that UNHCR had undertaken the largest voluntary repatriation movement of the Afghan refugees back home. More than four million had repatriated, mainly from Pakistan and Iran, where they lived since the early eighties. Even after the return of such large numbers, about two and a half million were still left, almost equally divided, in the two countries and thousands of others remained scattered all over the world.

In our efforts to help rehabilitate the returnees in their war-ravaged country and negotiate arrangements for the return of others who would do so only if the circumstances were right, I had to visit Afghanistan several times. During these and my many visits to the homes and camps of the Afghan refugees in Iran, Pakistan and India, I came to know the Afghan people very closely and developed an understanding and empathy for their plight and suffering. My many meetings, both formal and informal, with the Taliban leadership in Kabul and Kandahar and those of the Northern Alliance in Mazar-i-Sharif and other places, also helped me to understand their concerns and policies, however much I may have disagreed with them. I had thus developed a deep personal and professional attachment with Afghanistan and its people.

As I think of Afghanistan today, tired and forlorn faces of a weary and battered people fill my mind. Twenty years of unabated warfare have left their homeland in ruins and rubble. With their economy shattered, public infrastructures largely destroyed, all they wished for was simply to survive and live like human beings again. And yet once again they face more devastation and loss of lives, as well as renewed exile and homelessness for millions.

My concerns for the people of Afghanistan in their present crisis are mainly two. One, more high-tech air strikes and commando operations than anything they have experienced before are causing the devastation today. According to experts, the effects of these attacks, particularly those relating to the use of cluster bombs, are more lethal and will continue to kill, maim and harm the people over a long period of time. And two, equally importantly, whatever the outcome of the operations, it is bound to widen the existing differences among the warring factions of Afghanistan.

As regards military operations, the US had earlier expected that these would be quick and decisive. However, experts are now predicting that they will have to be continued over a much longer period of time before the desired results are achieved. This is because of the fierce resistance they are facing from the Taliban forces and the difficulties of commando operations in the rough and often inaccessible terrain of Afghanistan.

If the operations were prolonged, there would be more air strikes and commando operations, and thus more devastation. I shudder at the thought of the enormous additional humanitarian crisis they will create. As a former UN official, I also sympathise with my UN colleagues for the immensity of the task that lie ahead of them. It is not only the multifarious needs of the affected Afghan population, including the internally displaced persons (IDPs), that they will have to cater to, but also those of the huge number of new refugees who are once again seeking shelter in the neighboring countries. Equally problematic would be the pressure they will face from the various warring factions who will seek to recruit new fighters from among the refugees. This has happened in other refugee situations in the world.

Even if the military operations were not unduly prolonged and the US achieved its immediate objectives soon, one wonders whether the people of Afghanistan will see a quick return of peace in their country? Will America's "War against

our ethnic interests were accommodated from time to time. And two, it must take into account the concerns and interests of Afghanistan's neighbours, including Iran, Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics, Russia and, to some extent, India. Without their active or tacit support no solution can be worked out.

As to lessons from Afghanistan's history, one that stands out most clearly is the valour and fighting spirit of the Afghan people. Afghans have long been known as a nation of warriors who have successfully fought and defended their country against all foreign aggression. The British and the Russians, who vied for influence in Afghanistan in the nineteenth century, had to pay a heavy price for it. The history of what became known as the "Great Game" between these two powers bears testimony to that. The debacle of the Soviet forces at the hands of Afghan Mujahedeens in the 1980s is a more recent example of this. It led to the demise of the Soviet Union itself. The US forces must bear this history in mind.

taken into account. Here, the most difficult task would be the identification of proper representation of the Pashtuns, who form the largest ethnic group (some 40 percent of the population). Their interest should not be downplayed or sacrificed simply because they are almost solely represented by the Taliban, who are largely despised for their obscurantist religious and gender policies. Two factors must, however, be borne in mind in this regard. One, there hardly exists any other Pashtun political group who could represent the Pashtuns. Taliban have removed almost all opposition to their leadership of the Pashtuns. One such opposition leader, the venerated resistance commander, Abdul Haq, was recently killed, together with some of his colleagues. And two, since assuming power in 1996 and extending it over the years to almost ninety-five per cent of Afghan territory, the Taliban were able, to a large extent, to arrest the rampant corruption and general lawlessness that had pervaded the country since the departure of the Soviets. For this, they earned the gratitude of many Afghans. I have

more recent years against the Taliban, as part of the Northern Alliance, under the leadership of General Dostum. Uzbekistan's support to him, and to the Northern Alliance generally, is aimed primarily at stemming the flow of Taliban movement to Central Asia. The accommodation of Uzbek concerns in any new arrangement and a stable Afghanistan would thus be of great interest to Uzbekistan, as well as to Russia and the rest of Central Asia.

λ With the history of inter-ethnic rivalry, particularly between the Taliban and anti-Taliban forces, the need for a moderator or an intermediary from within Afghanistan, to broker a political settlement, cannot be over-stated. However, there are not many that could do the job. The one prominent name that has emerged is that of former King Zahir Shah. Efforts have already begun under the leadership of the SRSG to explore this possibility. Some quarters have, however, expressed scepticism about the ability and propriety of the King to play this role. A great deal of negotiations would, therefore, be needed to make him

prepared to underwrite the necessary human, financial and political support to the UN, for as long as necessary.

λ Should the UN be given the role of interim administration and peacekeeping in Afghanistan, extreme care will have to be taken not only in the deployment of civilian personnel but also in the selection of peacekeeping forces. The ordinary Pashtun population has long been fed by the Taliban leadership and their "guest" Osama Bin Laden with strong doses of antiquated Islamic principles and hatred of westerners. These have been reinforced by the present military operations. The situation must, therefore, be handled with a great deal of sensitivity.

λ The terrorist attacks of September 11 in the US and its after-effects have confronted the Islamic world, in particular, with a grave crisis of unprecedented nature and magnitude. The Afghan situation is only a part of it. Unless it is brought under control soon, it is may turn out to be the worst political, economic and social crisis the world has witnessed since World War II. And the Islamic world may be badly affected. There are indications for this already. The OIC should, therefore, take the leadership in formulating a common Islamic position that can contribute positively in arresting and resolving the crisis. As a moderate Muslim-majority country, Bangladesh can play a key role in this regard. It has earned the respect of the world community for its moderation and objectivity. A former Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Dr. Kamal Hossain, is already making a significant contribution in relation to the Afghan crisis as the UN Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan. He is also part of the advisory team for the SRSG and Secretary General Kofi Annan. Bangladesh could also offer peacekeeping forces to Afghanistan, should there be a need. Bangladeshi peacekeepers have earned a well-deserved reputation for their dedication and professionalism in many UN peacekeeping operations in the world.

To conclude, the fast emerging situation in Afghanistan should be viewed by the international community as a grave humanitarian crisis, which is an integral part of a larger and more difficult political crisis that has confronted the world since the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001. Unless checked soon, the ramifications of these crises would be far-reaching and disastrous. The international community must work unitedly to resolve them with great urgency.

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Terror" usher in an end to terrorism that they have been suffering all these years?

The answers to the above questions, everyone agrees, will be negative. Peace and tranquility cannot return quickly to that hugely fractured country. There is a need for a great deal of healing, which is bound to take a long time. To help the process, there will be the inevitable need for some sort of interim arrangement. Efforts towards these objectives must begin already. They cannot wait for the hostilities to end. Work must, therefore, continue on the two fronts simultaneously: one, to bring the military operations to an end sooner than later and, two, to begin work on arrangements for the future governance of Afghanistan. My focus in this piece of writing is more the latter than the former.

The complexity of the situation in Afghanistan is well known. Perhaps the most complicating factor, which began emerging since the overthrow of King Mohammad Zahir Shah in 1973, is the existence of many rival groups, at odds with each other. Not only the interests of these various factions will have to be satisfied, but also those of their cross-border patrons. How will that be brought about and by whom? And, if the factions are unable to agree among themselves, as is very much the case at present, can a solution be imposed upon the Afghan people from outside? My view is that while ordinary Afghans, irrespective of their ethnicity, hanker for an end to the conflicts that have ravaged them for so long, they and particularly their warlords would not accept any solution they may find ignoble from their perspectives.

Achieving a lasting peace in Afghanistan under these circumstances would, therefore, be almost an impossible task. But there is no alternative to achieving the seemingly impossible. And I think there is a much better opportunity for it now than ever, simply because the world attention is more focused on Afghanistan today than it has ever been.

At the beginning of their operations, the US and its allies had hoped that they would be able to dislodge the Taliban quickly from power and help the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces to take over Kabul and establish a new government for Afghanistan. But soon they realized the utter futility of such efforts in the present context. Some US officials are nevertheless still toying with the idea, but I am convinced it will not work. It would fail because, one, the alliance only represents smaller segments of the Afghan population; two, the alliance factions have banded together primarily because of their opposition to the Taliban and have little else in common; and, three, it controls only about five percent of the Afghan territory. It would thus, not be able to hold on to any gains it may make with the help of the US for very long. The Pashtuns, who constitute the largest ethnic group, and are largely represented by the Taliban, who control some ninety five percent of the territory, would certainly not accept their rule and resist them at any cost. The US military operations have, moreover, brought the Pashtuns closer to the Taliban. It will, therefore, be imperative to find some arrangement in which all the major ethnic groups, particularly the Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras and Uzbeks, are duly accommodated, ideally in a government of national unity. And this can only be achieved through a carefully worked out political settlement.

Any effort towards a political settlement must, to my mind, fulfill two basic requirements. One, it must draw lessons from Afghanistan's history and learn, in particular, the manner in which the vari-

As a lesson from this history, any political formula for Afghanistan must ensure that it is not externally induced. Any settlement, which smacks of dominance of one foreign power or another, is bound to fail. There is thus no alternative to a carefully worked out indigenous formula.

Who could help to work that out? The obvious choice, to my mind, would be the UN, with its vast experience in the field. Fortunately, the US stance towards the UN has undergone a recent change, despite its earlier doubts about the ability of the world body to help achieve its objectives in Afghanistan. Other big powers have also expressed their confidence in the UN in this regard. Equally fortunately, there is a deft Secretary General at the helm of affairs of the UN, who has already put the UN into full swing. The role of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Afghanistan has been resurrected and the latter has already begun his rounds to link up with the key players to identify a solution.

It must be remembered, however, that the same SRSG, Mr Lakhdar Brahimi, a former Foreign Minister of Algeria, had made similar rounds in the past as well. Nothing came out of them simply because the key States, who backed the respective factions, had lacked the political will to give him the support and co-operation he needed. The US position too was at best ambiguous.

This time around, however, the situation is very different in view of the magnitude of the international crisis generated by the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, of which the new Afghan crisis is an integral part. The UN is thus better placed today to play a more constructive role than in the past. I hope that the international community will provide it with a clear and unambiguous mandate, as well as the necessary financial and other support, to do the job.

As I think of the role of the UN and that of the international community at large in the face of the grave crisis looming around Afghanistan, the following thoughts come to mind:

λ The immediate task for the UN is to use its tact and diplomacy to promote quick end to the military operations in Afghanistan and simultaneously address the humanitarian issues raised by them. While the former is largely taking place from behind the scene, the latter activities should be more visible, effective and impartial. If the UN is seen to be actively involved in the delivery of diverse humanitarian assistance to the Afghans today, in an effective and impartial manner, its credibility in the more difficult political negotiations that lie ahead will be greatly enhanced. The best way to do so will be to improve the capacity of the UN agencies involved in humanitarian work both within and outside Afghanistan. While the reluctance of Pakistan and Iran to open their borders to new influx of refugees from Afghanistan may be understandable, they must consider doing so in their long-term interest. For, if the UN is enabled to assist the Afghans now, its credibility *vis a vis* the people of Afghanistan as a whole is bound to increase. This will be an asset for an interim UN administration in Afghanistan, as proposed below, and their task in forging future political unity. The Taliban leaders I met in Kabul and Kandahar never failed to recall the help they and their families got from UNHCR as refugees in Pakistan.

λ Simultaneous to these efforts, will be the task of identifying a framework for future inter-ethnic co-existence in Afghanistan. For any future arrangements to work, however, the concerns of different ethnic and minority groups will have to be recognised and fully

myself seen the difference between these two periods. Any future arrangement for Afghanistan would, therefore, have to deal with the Taliban factor as the thorniest issue. From their dismal record in the field of human rights, it is not difficult to understand the clamour from many quarters, both within and outside Afghanistan, for the exclusion of the Taliban from any arrangement for the future governance of Afghanistan. But is it realistic to exclude the Taliban totally? Are there moderate Taliban who could be brought together as part of a Pashtun coalition under some other nomenclature, if necessary? This would be worth exploring. But all hard-line Taliban would have to be carefully avoided, if there is to be any hope for the other factions to co-operate. Pakistan should agree to play a constructive role in this regard. It will be in its national interest to do so. The insistence of Pakistan for the unqualified inclusion of the Taliban in any future political arrangement for Afghanistan is a sure recipe to wreck the process.

λ In dealing with the Pashtun factor, it must also be remembered that, apart from forming a majority of the population in Afghanistan, Pashtuns also constitute a significant portion of the population of Pakistan. According to one figure, there are more than 12 million Pashtuns in Pakistan, as against 9.5 million in Afghanistan. Any political solution in Afghanistan must, therefore, have their tacit support. Otherwise the age-old Pashtun problem will return to bedevil Pakistani politics. Pakistan may be confronted with the spectre of disintegration once again. Any convulsion in Pakistan would engulf the entire region and must, therefore, be avoided at any cost.

λ The support of Iran will also be essential for a political settlement in Afghanistan. Foremost among Iran's concerns in Afghanistan is the safety and security of the large *shia* population in that country, mainly the ethnic Hazaras, who represent about 19 percent of the population. Among other things, the conflict between *sunni* Taliban and *shia* Hazaras, and the latter's persecution under Taliban rule, drew a large wedge between Iran and the Taliban rulers. Thus, despite their political differences with the US, the Iranians would welcome the removal of Taliban from power. This would help the Hazaras, who are part of the Northern Alliance through the Hezb-e-Wahadat party. The Iranians have also an interest in a stable government in Afghanistan. Without this, Iran's own security will remain hostage to the situation in Afghanistan, albeit to a lesser extent than that of Pakistan.

λ The Tajiks constitute some 25 percent of the population. They made a name for themselves for their contributions to the resistance movement against the Soviets. Legendary guerrilla commander, Ahmed Shah Massoud, also provided key leadership in the fight of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. Although his assassination last month has weakened the Alliance, the Tajiks remain its mainstay. In any political settlement, therefore, they would naturally expect to play a key role. Moreover, with their significant position in economic, cultural and educational fields, they would also contribute significantly to the future development of Afghanistan. Their role in the future governance of Afghanistan would also help stability in neighbouring Tajikistan where the fight between the government and the Islamists since the demise of the Soviet Union were affected by the conflict in Afghanistan.

λ The Uzbeks, who form a smaller percentage of the Afghan population (about 7 percent) also contributed significantly to the fight against the Soviets and in the

Laila-tul-Barat-the night of salvation

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

LAILA-TUL-BARAT not only brings for us glad tidings of the arrival of the month of Ramadan, it also gives the Muslims all over the world an opportunity to hail this month (Ramadan) in a befitting manner. Now, what do we mean by the terms "Laila-tul-Barat" and "Shab-e-Barat"? The word "Lail" is an Arabic one meaning "night". "Shab" is a Persian word which also means "night", and "Barat", a Persian word, means "salvation". So the terms *Laila-tul-Barat* or *Shab-e-Barat* means the "night of salvation".

Now a few words on the importance of this sacred night - the night of the nights. The Holy Qur-an does not specifically mention anything about this night, but our holy Prophet (pbuh) has laid great emphasis on the significance and importance of this glorious night. As per Baihaqi Hadis Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqi (RA) says: "I have heard the holy Prophet (pbuh) saying on the 15th night of the month of Shaban in the following manner. "O Allah! Because of your forgiveness, I want to get rid of your punishment. Through your pleasure I want salvation from your "azab" (punishment). You are Great, I don't have the power to please you fully. You are as you have praised yourself."

According to Hazrat Ayesha (RA), the Prophet (pbuh) asked her to learn the aforesaid prayer and pray in the same way to Allah Gafur-ar-Rahim (The Great Forgiver). She was also asked to tell others to learn this prayer for supplication to Benign Allah. We may recall here another important Hadis of our Prophet (pbuh) in this connection. Here also we may refer to what Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqi (RA) says. She says that one night she found the Prophet (pbuh) prostrating on his prayer mat while offering his "Tahajjid" (mid-night) prayer, and the duration of the prostration (Sajda) was so long and unusual that she apprehended the Prophet was collapsing, but fortunately he was not; he was deeply absorbed in meditation and supplication to Merciful Allah.

Subsequently he told his dear consort, "Ayesha! Have you any idea about this night?" In reply she said that only All-knowing Allah and His Messenger knew best. Then the Prophet (pbuh) told her: "Tonight is the 15th night of the month of Shaban. Those who seek Benign Allah's forgiveness, He forgives them those who seek His mercy and pity. He bestows such bounties on them. But those who are inimical to others they are deprived of such bounties."

On this solemn occasion, in our country, when Muslim devotees are deeply absorbed in their meditation and supplication to Merciful Allah, a number of misguided youngsters in almost every locality remain busy in banging crackers, exploding hand bombs and displaying fireworks. But Islam does not sanction such senseless merrymaking which also costs considerable amount of money. This practice is undesirable. Parents and guardians should restrain their wards from doing such un-Islamic activities, for such merrymaking not only disturbs the devotees, other people of the locality including the patients, the old and infirm are also deprived of their much-needed mental peace and rest.

As has been stated above, our dear Prophet (pbuh) not only offered special prayers during the auspicious night of *Laila-tul-Barat*, it was his usual practice also to visit graveyard and supplicate the Benign Allah for salvation of the departed souls. Let's prepare ourselves to observe the sacred night in a befitting manner.

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