

Eliminating middlemen from the migrant worker's life

Will the officials heed the PM's advice?

THE prime minister's words regarding the need to protect migrant workers from middlemen, who often cheat them, hit the nail on the head. We all know of the harrowing tales of migrant workers being cheated of huge sums of money by the middlemen who have promised lucrative jobs which either did not exist or paid much lower than promised. Many prospective migrant workers have taken on hazardous journeys because of such promises, either perishing in the seas or ending up in exploitative employment or in foreign jails. Women migrant workers have been subjected to physical and sexual abuse falling prey to such middlemen. Thus, there is an immediate need to take necessary steps so that the rights of Bangladeshi migrant workers are protected and they are treated with respect and dignity both at home and abroad. The PM has mentioned some of the measures that, if taken and continued, would significantly reduce the number of migrant workers who are swindled or exploited. One of them is have a stronger monitoring system which includes a database with details of all migrant workers. But in order to completely eliminate the insidious reach of middlemen at many stages of the whole process, recruiting syndicates and brokers at home and in the recruiting countries have to be exposed and punished, regardless of their connections with the existing power structure. We sincerely hope that the directives given by the PM will be taken seriously and an effective system will be created to offset the control and power of middlemen who hike up the cost of recruitment process and leave migrant workers vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation. Our embassies in the recruiting countries should be instructed and equipped to play a more proactive role in helping migrant workers who are in trouble because of fraud. The PM's emphasis on creating skilled manpower is also something that is of great importance, and we hope the government will create opportunities for prospective migrant workers to acquire skills that will help them get better paying jobs abroad.

The increasing menace of noise pollution

Stricter law enforcement required

NOISE pollution has become a health hazard for Dhaka dwellers. According to studies, the sound level around Shahbag, a busy locale of Dhaka accommodating two big hospitals, is between 80 and 150 decibels (dB); the acceptable sound level for silent zones (areas that include hospitals and schools), according to Noise Pollution (Control) Rules-2006, is 50 dB for daytime and 40 dB for night. As per World Health Organization (WHO), exposure to sound above 60 dB can cause temporary deafness and prolonged exposure to sound above 100 dB can lead to hearing impairment. The most affected by the increasing noise pollution are children, the elderly and expecting mothers. According to an otologist, exposure to noise can affect the condition of a foetus and even lead to premature delivery. Although rules have been formulated to reduce sound pollution, their lax enforcement has led to the deterioration of the situation. Often these rules are violated with impunity under the very noses of law enforcement authorities. The Department of Environment (DoE) points to the lack of manpower for their inability to conduct regular drives against noise pollution. And while the DoE claims to have "trained 19,000 people including officials of police, BRIA, DoE, as well as drivers" to combat noise pollution, little progress has been made over the years to contain this growing problem. A DoE official said that the department has plans to run a pilot project to contain noise pollution with the help of the locals. It is high time the concerned authorities took noise pollution seriously and took measures to strictly enforce related laws to address it. We hope the DoE will make good on its word and, with the help of locals, soon initiate effective programmes to contain this menace before it spirals out of control.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Protect Meghna from irreparable damage

According to a report by Asian Development Bank, Meghna river's deteriorating condition may reach a point of no return in the next five years, due to pollution. One of the three major rivers of Bangladesh, it might soon reach a threshold that would be beyond treatment. DWASA has already undertaken ambitious projects involving Meghna that, upon completion, has the potential to provide 40 percent of drinking water for Dhaka dwellers. Water contamination caused by industrial discharges, which are released into the river through canals, has already left its marine life to suffer greatly. But now, even the future of safe-drinking water is at stake, given our negligence and treatment towards our rivers. ADB has tried to explore the potential of using Meghna as a source of drinking water but to turn that into a reality, measures must be taken to prevent the river from further deterioration like: classifying the critical areas, reducing commercial practices that threaten the condition of the river and encouraging local supervision and awareness. We are already in a state of despair regarding some of the major rivers—Buriganga, Shitalakkhya, and Turag—and we cannot afford Meghna to follow the same path. If we are to secure a sustainable source of water for ourselves, we must look beyond our selfish, profit maximisation agenda and opt for strict supervision.

Luthfe Ali, by email.

Solar radiation management can help combat climate change



QUAMRUL HAIDER

IN the Environmental Physics course that I teach from time to time, a student once remarked that we really do not have to worry about the deleterious effects of climate change because technology would be able to solve all the problems we are facing. At that time, I thought this viewpoint is an extreme case of technological optimism. But today, as the likelihood of international consensus to stabilise atmospheric composition of greenhouse gases seems remote while the consequences of climate change are becoming more apparent and direr, many in the scientific community believe that the potential last-ditch effort to stave off the disastrous impacts of climate change is to appeal to technology, geoengineering in particular. Even the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change considers geoengineering as a necessary Plan B if global warming does not show any signs of slowing. Geoengineering is deliberate, large-scale manipulation of the Earth's environment to counteract anthropogenic climate change. It encompasses two different approaches using a variety of cutting-edge technologies to undo the effects of greenhouse gas emissions. They are removal and sequestration of carbon dioxide to lower its concentration in the atmosphere and offsetting global warming by targeting the overall amount of solar energy reaching the Earth. The removal technologies were discussed in an op-ed piece published in this newspaper on November 29, 2018. Some of the offsetting options scientists are exploring are reflecting part of the sunlight back into space before it reaches the Earth's surface, allowing more of the heat trapped by the Earth's surface to escape into space, and increasing the reflectivity of roofs, Arctic ice, glaciers, pavements, croplands and deserts. Known as Solar Radiation Management (SRM), these options would slow down the rise in Earth's temperature until carbon dioxide emissions can be reduced enough to prevent catastrophic repercussions of human-driven climate change.

The fraction of incoming sunlight that is reflected back to space could readily be changed by increasing the reflectivity of the low-level clouds. This could be achieved by spraying seawater in the air where they would evaporate to form sea salt, which would seed the clouds above the oceans making them thicker and more reflective. Several simulations have confirmed that the seeding mechanism, also known as Marine Cloud Brightening, would work with the likelihood to lower temperatures at a regional level. Another proposed cloud-based



approach involves thinning the high-altitude Cirrus clouds in the stratosphere by injecting ice nuclei into regions where the clouds are formed. These wispy clouds do not reflect much solar radiation back into space, and instead trap heat in the atmosphere by absorbing thermal radiation emitted by the Earth. While this method is not technically an example of SRM, thinning Cirrus clouds would provide more pathways for the trapped heat to escape into space, and thus, potentially cool the Earth. Currently, work in this field is limited to theoretical studies at research institutions. However, research shows that a cooling of about one degree Celsius is possible by thinning the clouds globally. Scientists have known for a long time

that volcanic eruptions could alter a planet's climate for months on end, as millions of sunlight-reflecting minute particles (aerosols) are spread throughout the atmosphere. Indeed, the "cold and miserable" summer of 1816 in China, Europe and North America is attributed to the enormous eruption of the Indonesian volcano Tambora in 1815. Though the aerosol haze produced by the Tambora eruption reflected less than one percent of sunlight, it was enough to drop global temperatures by as much as two degrees by the summer of 1816.

The 1991 explosion of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines cooled the Earth by about 0.5 degrees, while the average global temperatures were as much as one degree cooler for the next five years after the 1883 eruption of Krakatoa in Indonesia. Furthermore, the volcanic-induced cooling of the oceans caused by Krakatoa's eruption was enough to offset rise in the ocean temperature and sea level for a few decades. Inspired by these eruptions and the subsequent cooling effect of their sunlight-blocking plume of sulphate particles, scientists are suggesting injecting sulphate aerosols or hydrogen sulphide in the stratosphere. The geoengineering research programme at Harvard University is currently trying to model how clouds of

such particles would behave. One of the more practical SRM techniques that can be implemented easily is whitening surfaces like roofs, croplands and pavements to reflect more sunlight back into space. By absorbing less sunlight, they would negate some of the warming effect from greenhouse gas emissions. This is what greenhouse owners do with whitewash and blinds. The small island of Bermuda in the North Atlantic is leading the way with white roof houses that not only reflect sunlight, but also keep the homes cooler during the hotter months. A study at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California indicates that a 1,000 square foot of white rooftop has about the same one-time impact on global warming as reducing ten tons of carbon dioxide emissions. Ice sheets are responsible for reflecting lots of sunlight into space. So less ice in the Arctic due to melting means less heat leaving the planet. Hence, scientists want to spread tiny glass beads around the Arctic in the hopes of making the polar ice more reflective and less prone to melting. Another idea is to cover deserts and glaciers with reflective sheets. Perhaps the most challenging concept to control solar radiation entails deploying an array of reflecting mirrors at strategic points between the Sun and the Earth—just as we all do with sunscreens and sunblocks. Calculations by space scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California indicate that a mirror roughly the size of Greenland would be able to block one to two percent of solar radiation from reaching the Earth. The idea of a sunscreen is still on the drawing board. Finally, as we transition into a new era in which human activity is shaping the Earth more than the natural forces, technology could be seen as a way of humans reshaping the planet by limiting the adverse effects of climate change. Also, because international political efforts to curtail greenhouse gas emissions have been slow in coming, solar radiation management is a possible measure to be used if climate change trends become disruptive enough to warrant extreme and risky measures.

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Is peace with the Taliban possible?



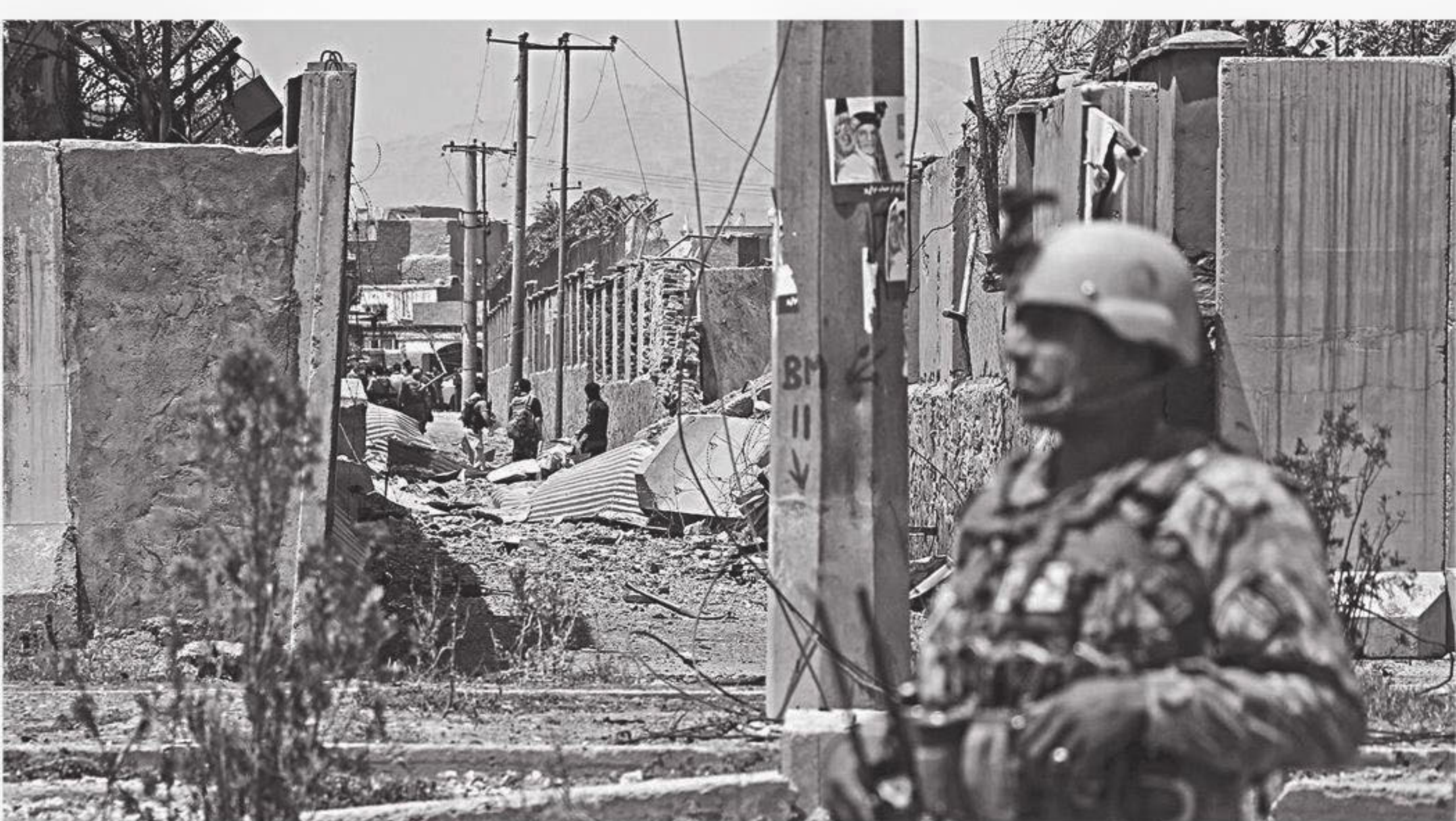
AMIN SAIKAL

DESPIITE ongoing peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, the bloody conflict in Afghanistan continues to take a heavy toll on the country's people. The recent suicide bombing by the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State (IS-K) at a wedding in Kabul, which killed more than 60 and injured close to 200, is a stark reminder of Afghanistan's poor security situation. It also shows that the Taliban are not the only armed opposition fuelling the conflict. A US-Taliban peace pact is, therefore, unlikely to bring any respite. The US-Taliban negotiations in Doha—in which the Afghan government is not a participant—are comparable to two previous peace processes: the Paris talks that resulted in the January, 1973 peace treaty between the US and North Vietnam; and the negotiations that led to the 1988 Geneva Accords, signed by the Afghan and Pakistani governments with the Soviet Union and the US acting as guarantors. These two agreements were designed to enable the US and the Soviet Union to exit with "honour" from wars they could not win, by bringing about, respectively, the "Vietnamisation" and "Afghanisation" of those conflicts. Both agreements failed to achieve their objectives. By 1975, Soviet-backed North Vietnamese forces had overrun South Vietnam, humiliating the US. And in 1992, the US-supported Afghan Islamic resistance forces, the mujahideen, brought about the collapse of the Soviet-installed communist regime in Kabul. Whereas the North Vietnamese soon succeeded in uniting their country and restoring peace, however, Afghanistan has fared much worse. The socially and politically divided mujahideen soon turned their guns on one another. And Pakistan took the opportunity to advance its regional interests by nurturing the extremist Taliban, who in 1996-98 conquered most of Afghanistan and subjected it to strict theocratic rule. The Taliban in turn harboured al-Qaeda, which carried out the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US. That prompted America, backed by its NATO and non-NATO allies, to intervene in Afghanistan the following month with the aim of destroying al-Qaeda and dislodging the Taliban regime. The US-led forces quickly dispersed al-Qaeda's leadership and ended Taliban rule, but failed to defeat either group decisively. The Taliban and elements of al-Qaeda staged a comeback within two years of the US intervention,

and have tied down American and allied forces in a low-grade but staggeringly costly insurgency ever since. Now, after nearly two decades of fighting, US President Donald Trump desperately wants to disentangle America from a seemingly unwinnable war—preferably through a political settlement with the Taliban. Trump's Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, the Afghan-American Zalmay Khalilzad, has been engaged since September 2018 in shuttle diplomacy, in an eerie parallel with the unsuccessful efforts of then-US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to bring about peace in the

between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which the Taliban regard as "illegitimate" and a "puppet"; and a ceasefire across Afghanistan. But although Khalilzad may finally manage to reach agreement with the Taliban regarding the first two aims, there is no guarantee that America's partner in the peace talks will help to realise the remaining two. The Afghan government's weakness and internal divisions would give the Taliban the upper hand in any power-sharing arrangement, particularly after US and allied forces have left. And it is very doubtful that the Taliban, whether in power or as a partner in power, would

operational in 2015 and is said to have about 2,000 fighters (including some Taliban defectors), who are dedicated to creating disruption and chaos. They have been responsible for horrific attacks across Afghanistan, especially in Kabul and mostly on civilian targets. Any withdrawal of US and allied forces during Trump's current term, whether phased or otherwise, must be based on conditions on the ground. Otherwise, the consequences will be disastrous. Because of the way the peace process and the situation in Afghanistan have evolved, a hasty foreign-troop withdrawal would lead to a fiasco similar to those generated by the



An Afghan soldier stands guard at the site where a Taliban car bomb detonated at the entrance of a police station in Kabul on August 7, 2019.

PHOTO: AFP/STR

Middle East following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Khalilzad has just begun his ninth round of negotiations with Taliban representatives in Doha. Separately, he has had numerous meetings with the Afghan government and non-governmental leaders, as well as with regional and international actors—but not Iran, with which the US is locked in a cycle of deepening hostility. He has focused on four interrelated objectives: a timetable for the exit of all foreign troops currently in Afghanistan; a commitment from the Taliban to prevent hostile acts being launched against the US from Afghan soil; direct negotiations

be able to control other armed opposition groups, most importantly IS-K, or enlist the support of a cross-section of Afghanistan's diverse population. The Taliban are ethnic Pashtuns, hailing specifically from the Ghilzai tribe to which Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and many around him belong. Neither the Ghilzais nor the rival Durani tribe of former President Hamid Karzai are much trusted by non-Pashtun ethnic groups, who (though themselves divided) collectively form the largest share of Afghanistan's population. To complicate matters further, all Afghan ethnic groups have extensive cross-border ties with the country's neighbours. Meanwhile, IS-K has loyalty to no one inside Afghanistan. The group became

earlier Soviet retreat from the country and by the US withdrawal from Vietnam. To avoid such a catastrophe, the US and its allies need to remain in Afghanistan for at least another decade. But Trump is in a hurry, and thinks that a strong CIA presence in the country will manage to do what Western forces have been unable to achieve. More likely than not, that will prove to be wishful thinking. Amin Saikal, a professor of political science at the Australian National University, is the author of "Zone of Crisis: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq", and co-author (with James Piscatori) of "Islam Beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics." Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2019. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)