

RESTORATION of HOPES for the AFGHAN PEACE

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According to the peace deal between the US and the Taliban, the intra-Afghan dialogue should have instigated three months ago. However, the 5000 inmates of the Taliban should have been released before the commencement of the talks. Earlier, the release was considered to be a red line for the Afghan government and it was declared that any decision regarding the prisoners is only within the authority of the Afghan government. But after a number of visits of US officials to Kabul and Qatar, and with some ups and downs, the prisoners release process was initiated by the Afghan government. To show goodwill, the Taliban also released some prisoners of the Afghan government. Also, the Taliban announced three days' ceasefire during Eid-ul-fitr 2020, which was not only welcomed by the Afghan government but the Afghan officials proclaimed the release of some other inmates of the Taliban. Subsequently, an environment of trust was being established between both sides and discussions about peace were stimulated once again. How effective the current progress can be for bringing peace to Afghanistan? What other

obstacles exist that the Taliban and the Afghan government need to overcome? We discuss the answers in this analysis.

Latest Progress in Peace Process

The agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan was signed on 29th February, 2020 between the Taliban and the US. Both sides have shown commitment towards the implementation of the deal. However, instigation of the intra-Afghan dialogue; a key element of the agreement has been hindered due to disagreements over the prisoner's release. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani has recently said to the Atlantic Council during an online conversation that the Afghan government will soon release the remaining 2000 inmates. The Taliban and U.S. officials welcomed the latest progress in the peace process. The Taliban have also declared that the intra-Afghan talks will commence one week after the release of all 5000 prisoners. Reduction in violence and leniency regarding peace process by both sides have apparently brought the Afghan nation closer to peace and reconciliation.

Role of Pakistan in the Current Peace Efforts

After the peace deal in Doha, Zalmay Khalilzad, special representative of the US had several visits to Pakistan. Khalilzad visited Qatar and Pakistan before his arrival to Afghanistan a few days ago. He expressed gratitude for Pakistan's constructive role in the Afghan peace.

After Zalmay Khalilzad, Pakistan's army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa also visited Kabul, and met with President Ghani and chairman of High council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah. His visit to Kabul indicates that Pakistan still has a key role in the Afghan peace and its support is vital for the success of the peace talks. Pakistan strives to benefit from the peace process by ensuring that the Afghan soil will not be used against Pakistan in the future. General Bajwa's visit was also aiming for the same purpose. On the other hand,

Pakistan's concern might be due to Khalilzad's attempt to encourage India to meet face to face with the Taliban. Inclusion of India in the Afghan peace is apparently for preventing any probable challenges towards peace. Also, the US might be striving to strengthen its strategic partnership with India and to reduce the influences of China and Russia. It seems to be a concern for Pakistan and its partner country China, as both countries are worried that India might use the Afghan soil against Pakistan and economic interests of China in the region. However, the Afghan official assured general Bajwa during his visit that the Afghan soil will not be used against any country. Seemingly, General Bajwa visited Kabul to attain such assurance and alert the Afghan officials about concerning matters.

Attempts to Sabotage the Peace Process

Truly, there are some local and foreign players whose interests are connected to the current war and, therefore, they strive to sabotage the peace process. We have witnessed earlier that armed attacks used to increase and influential people from both sides were being killed and captured whenever the peace talks were in progress.

Even though the recent progress in the peace process was welcomed locally and internationally, but as an attempt of sabotaging the peace process, Mohammad Ayaz Niazai, a renowned religious scholar and Imam of Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan Mosque was killed in bomb explosion on 2nd June, 2020. The Taliban condemned the attack on Ayaz Niazai and called it a big crime. Later, the Afghan government appointed a delegation to investigate the attack. Similar attacks occurred on 12th June, 2020 when Azizullah Mufleh and Mawlavi Ainullah; two well-known scholars and speakers were killed in Kabul's Sher Shah Soori Mosque and Takhar's Chah Aab district respectively.

As scholars hold an extraordinary place among people of Afghanistan and their stance in national and religious matters are greatly respected, their killing can only be a part of wrongdoings of those who want to reestablish distrust and create obstacles for the peace process.

Since the Taliban and the Afghan government mutually condemned the recent attacks on scholars, this can only indicate that some local and foreign groups still consider the peace as threat to their interests and are concerned about the commencement of Intra-Afghan dialogue.

Peace Process and the Remaining Prisoners

In an exclusive interview with the Atlantic Council, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani has declared that the Afghan government will release the remaining 2000 prisoners. The Taliban welcomed President Ghani's statement and expressed their readiness for the Intra-Afghan dialogue. As the prisoners release is presumed as a prerequisite for the commencement of Intra-Afghan dialogue, the latest positive statements about the release have establish a healthier environment of trust and assurance. The Taliban are also willing to release the remaining number of prisoners from their prisons.

As planned, the intra-Afghan talks will begin after the release of all prisoners. However, a significant element of the talks will be perseverance of the current government. The Taliban are against the current administration to remain in power and purposed formation of an interim government. However, the Afghan president has once again rejected the idea of an interim government during his interview with the Atlantic Council, and has said that he will not repeat the unsuccessful experience of the former president Dr. Najibullah, and he will not resign from the presidency. Apparently, such statements indicate that there is a long way towards peace and reconciliation.

Conclusion

As the Afghan peace has comparatively greater chance of success considering the latest progresses, the Afghan government and the Taliban should take advantage of the opportunity by strengthening confidence and trust, and accomplish the remaining stages towards peace in a sensible manner. Both sides should hasten the prisoners release process in order to open doors for the intra-Afghan dialogue. In addition, the Taliban and the Afghan government should also strive to avert all attempts of local and foreign bodies that intend to sabotage the peace process.

In addition, all countries in the region that are interested in the Afghan peace process should be reassured that the Afghan soil will not be used against any country. In this regard, the Afghan government should have the support of international community.

Attacks on religious scholars, politicians, and national figures is a failed attempt of sabotaging the peace process. They should be prevented and their contrivers should be exposed, since some groups might be striving to prevent or interrupt the peace process.

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Extension of School Holidays and Its Impact on Afghanistan's Educational System



Among other effects, educational systems worldwide have been particularly hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. According to the United Nations, more than one third of the world population has been isolated due to the pandemic and 166 countries have closed schools and universities. As a result of schools closures, around 1.5 Billion pupils have been affected. The outbreak has also led to closure of 18,000 schools before the commencement of educational year in Afghanistan, and 9 million pupils and 203,201 teachers remain out of school. In addition, 169 higher education institutions have been closed, affecting 388,191 students.

Countries all around the world, including Afghanistan, strive to adopt two alternatives to fill the gaps created by school closures; utilization of TV channels and using the internet. Such transformation of educational systems has suddenly shifted physical presence in educational centers into remote studies. On the other hand, academic institutions are unacquainted with remote platforms. In current circumstances, access to electricity, technology, and the internet have not been

facilitated enough in the country to commence remote studies. It is a challenge that many countries worldwide are facing. For instance, In California of the United States, 16% of the students do not have access to the internet, 27% has only limited access to the internet, and 10% of the students can access the internet only through their smartphones. Certainly, the problem is much profound in Afghanistan compared to the state of California. In Afghanistan, Poverty and poor economic condition have reduced access to technology. There are many families that do not even have electricity and television. Which means, utilizing remote platforms for studies is not possible for many students in Afghanistan.

The following are some staggering effects of school closures.

Interruption of the learning process

Schools are places where knowledge and skills are taught and transferred to children and youngsters. School closures will particularly affect those students whose learning capacity is comparatively feeble and are unable to process and memorize a higher amount information. In addition, our country is severely affected by illiteracy. Numerous families are either unaware of the basic education system of the country or they are inconsiderate in this regard. Their hopes are connected to schools, teachers and textbooks. Without schools and teachers, they are unacquainted with the ways through which they can help their children. Subsequently, the problem will create obstacles for students to carry on their studies in schools after the lockdown. Hence, the lockdown has the worst effect on the learning process. Especially those students whose had poor performance in school and were pressured by teachers for improvement are highly affected by school closures.

Engrossment of students in other activities

When almost all governmental and non-governmental establishments are shut down indefinitely and assemblies are also prohibited, family incomes are also affected due to inability to work. As a result, families are forced to engross their children in work. Moreover, private schools are not being paid and are facing financial shortcomings. Hence, students and teachers run into depression and mental illnesses, which will affect their lives after the reopening of schools. The impact is particularly severe in some rural areas where students have no assurance to return to schools after a short period of time.

Social isolation

As schools are places for social connectedness, their closure will disconnect thousands of students with their friends and will consequently lead to social isolation. This leads to agitation of students about schools reopening. The experience is far more overwhelming among 12th grade students as they are excited to start their new journey towards Kankor and university.

Unscheduled lifestyle of children

Since expert's advice children not to play with technology, especially television and the internet for more than two hours every day, so the lockdown, school closures and interruption of all social activities have cluttered family management. As a result, children choose to spend time on video games, smartphones, computers and television, which will have long-run and short-run mental and behavioral effects on children. Although TV channels and online web pages have learning courses, but children do not usually pursue such programs, and those who do, are not consistent enough to uncover the efficiency of such

learning programs. In addition, children see schools and dependence of teachers as the only ways of learning and education. Remote studies (via TV channels and the internet) require assistance from parents, which is unfortunately not a part of principles in Afghan societies.

Some teachers might see themselves incapable of helping their students during the pandemic. However, it is preferred that they should still strive to utilize the current opportunities in order to help their students.

It is a fact that the mental, social and economic conditions will not take its previous form after the crisis. The effects of the pandemic will be severe and long-lasting. Hence, after the reopening of schools, teachers should keep in mind that students have psychologically changed and have been affected by the pandemic. Some of them have lost their relatives, some have experienced financial difficulties due to job losses of their parents, and some might have experience violence at their homes during the lockdown. Even if the mentioned difficulties have not been experienced by students, witnessing intense news of deaths, war and insecurity have affected their minds and it will take time to return to normal condition.

According to some researches, the process took around 16 years for students to come to normal condition after the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

Many societies face problems while dealing with distance learning due to lack of access to related electronic appliances such as, computer and smartphones. Therefore, in order to facilitate remote studies for families with poor economic condition or those who live in rural area, and has no access to internet, utilizing

TV channels and radios are the best alternatives to somewhat replace physical studies at schools.

However, the best of option is for families to directly help their children and youngsters. Revision of all subjects including subjects of lower grades such as languages, math, history and geography, and high grade subjects such as physics, chemistry and biology is crucial during the lockdown. This is because something of a smaller amount but permanent is better than anything excessive occurring once.

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