**A rude awakening**

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| `SAUDADE` is the recollection of feelings, experiences, places or events that once brought excitement or comfort, and the absence of which now brings a mixture of sad and happy feelings sadness for the lost past and happiness for having experienced it. It would thus be right to say that one experiences saudade when Abbottabad of the 1980s comes to mind.  Afghan refugees had just started trickling into the serene landscape of the hill station, which then used to be quite sparsely populated. A little before dusk, smoke could be seen billowing from the fires set up outside the tents with the rich aroma of ovenbaked bread.  One does not remember encountering garbage, as one does now, during the evening walks in the shadows of the poplar-trees that lined the single-lane road running through the length of Abbottabad. The ubiquitous springs mentioned by Major James Abbott, the first deputy commissioner of Hazara in the mid-19th century, kept bubbling well upto the turn of the present millennium, before drying up completely.  A Pashto idiom states that the time of youth is like an evening of winter, short and indeed fleeting. Our present existence is like a frightful awakening from a beautiful but brief sleep where the Abbottabad of yore seems to have metamorphosed into one of the ugliest places on earth. Most strikingly, a population implosion has occurred, bringing with it the concomitant hazards. Garbage dumps dot the landscape, while houses and shops have been built on watercourses that in the days gone by would carry rainwater.  The most galling spectre is the one where young children are seen rummaging through mounds of garbage. Invariably, all these children, with some as young as five, are Pakhtuns of Afghan origin. Not only these children but their parents too and in quite a large number of cases their grandparents were also born on Pakistani soll.  This by no means is an unfounded assumption; it is substantiated by the incontrovertible fact that Afghans of Pakhtun stock marry young and their four-decade-long stay in the country is long enough to spawn three generations.  It is an ungainly sight to see these children fending for themselves and their extended families from dawn to dusk in extreme weather conditions. These garbage dumps are in fact their habitats in the daytime where they are seen eating, sleeping and even playing marbles. The garbage also includes medical waste as private hospitals and their managements, in their mercantile pursuits, appear least concerned with the safe disposal of litter of allodious description.  According to the UNHCR, there are about 2.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, out of which some 1.4m are registered. At one time there were about 4m Afghan refugees in the country. A repatriation of sorts commenced in 2016 when 360,000 refugees returned to Afghanistan.  It is essential to acknowledge that the Afghan conflict is a human tragedy of colossal proportions which we can neither erase from our memory nor dismiss from our midst with half-baked measures. What is even more saddening than the tragedy itself is the desensitisation of our society, and also of the world atlarge, as to how the present generation of Afghan children, whom we stubbornly continue to label as refugees, are being brought up in the middens. This desensitisation is manifest from the way the fate of these crowds of children has been accepted as the necessary corollary of an unending war.  The Afghan conflict does not appear to be abating anytime soon. The much talkedabout peace deal with the Afghan Taliban doesnotappeartobe anything more than a move aimed at attaining some short-term objectives. Ground realities, as we in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have come to understand through our coexistence with the Afghans, would indicate that the Taliban`s return topower in Afghanistan will unleash another wave of refugees, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle.  Every fortnight or so, some Afghan Taliban leaders are seen on television boarding or disembarking from a plane in a major world capital in their pretentious attempts to reach a peace deal. One would have wished that such news were carrie d in tandem with the videos of young scavengers carrying sacks full of garbage on their backs.  The fact that a suicide attack by a child precedes such sanctimonious visits by these men in long white robes demonstrates how little the Taliban value human life. The world`s conscience would never be believed to have ever been pricked unless the Taliban are made to accept the rights of Afghan children.  The writeris the author of Less Than Civil: The State of Civil Service in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.  nasseryousaf@gmail.com |  |