**Afghan Unrest: All is not Lost Yet**

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President Ashraf Ghani has asserted that his government will not kneel before any destructive force ever. He referred to Taliban by using the term ‘destructive force’, because the latter in their ‘Blitzkrieg’ on motorbikes are taking over towns. He uttered his stance while addressing a joint session in the Afghanistan’s National Assembly. There are reports of intense fighting in and around the City of Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province. As per the latest reports, the Taliban have entered the city and are occupying several buildings, which are being used as fortresses to repel the government forces. As reported by the international media, General Sami Sadat, a military commander leading the Afghan Military campaign in Helmand province, has asked residents of the city to leave their homes and evacuate the city. This is a standard operating procedure for urban warfare, to evacuate the civilians and carpet bomb the area. It seems like such a scenario is emerging. There are reports of deployment of B52 bombers by the US forces, an indication for an air operation, if Taliban persist with their unstoppable military advancement. Lashkar Gah has a population of about 100,200. How will they all leave? Where will they go? The dysfunctional regime in Kabul has not made any contingency plans for evacuation or designated any safe area where the residents can temporarily move.

In such a scenario, people with some wherewithal to survive might be able to escape the bombing by moving to safer areas, and those with no financial means to move will become victims of cross fire between the Taliban and Government forces, or might even suffer bombing by the US to support Kabul’s Government forces.

The international community can still come forward and help Afghan parties in resolving the conflict and finding a political solution.

While the international media is focusing its cameras and microphones on the lost territory and territory gained by warring parties, a rather grim shrill voice of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) seems to be muffled by gunfire and political mayhem in the unfortunate country. UNAMA reported, in its Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, that there were 1659 civilians killed and 3254 wounded; a heartbreaking 47 percent increase compared to the statistics of last year. UNAMA particularly expressed its concerns about the acute rise in the number of civilian casualties recorded in the months of May and June that is equal to the casualties recorded in the four months preceding May. The UNAMA further reported that the number of women and children in these casualties, approximately stands at 46 percent. According to the report, thirty-two percent were children, with 468 killed and 1214 wounded. Fourteen percent of civilian casualties were women with 291 killed and 508 wounded. This is a huge loss of precious human lives in 8 weeks, while the real civil war, which I had argued in my last write up, is yet to happen, and the efforts to avoid that, could result in almost a human catastrophe. The international community can still come forward and help Afghan parties in resolving the conflict and finding a political solution. The UN Secretary General’s Special envoy Deborah Lyons urged Taliban and the Afghan leaders to take heed of the conflict’s grim and chilling trajectory and its devastating impacts on civilians. The US special envoy for Afghanistan Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad, in an interview to VOA, stressed that neither side can truly win with the use of military force.

Except for these pronouncements and platitudes, tangible efforts for peace in Afghanistan are lacking the strategies to avert bloodshed and a fratricidal war. It is strange and shocking to see a total apathy by the international community to the impending catastrophe unfolding, resulting in loss of innocent lives, including the lives of the women, children and the elderly. There is a need for the UN to move without any delay. The UN secretary General should immediately dispatch a special envoy to the region and put political pressure on warring sides to cease hostilities and initiate dialogue for peaceful settlement of the Afghan imbroglio. The countries who were directly or indirectly involved in the Doha Peace process, especially the US, Qatar, Pakistan, China and Russia should put pressure on Taliban as well as on Kabul regime to de-escalate the tensions, and bid for peace as an incentive; rather than opting out for a fratricidal war in Afghanistan which will, on all accounts, be a lose-lose situation for all the stakeholders involved.

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