**The Afghan scramble**

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It looks like a story from a trashy airport thriller – US troops arriving in Afghanistan to help American diplomatic staff and others leave. Countries are scrambling to evacuate their citizens and the Taliban are advancing rapidly. The capital of the Logar province that the Taliban captured on Aug 13 is just 80km from the country’s capital Kabul.

The UN chief is concerned that the situation is spinning out of control. Afghan civilians are bracing for devastating consequences as millions of people find themselves under threat, with hundreds of thousands already having left their homes. The foreign troop withdrawal after 20 years of military operations has encouraged the Taliban to intensify their attacks and occupation strategy. The Afghan people had made some noticeable gains since 2001, when the Taliban were ousted from power. These gains were in multiple fields such as restoration of the education sector from the primary to higher levels.

As an educationist, I visited Afghanistan multiple times and went to many provinces across the country where schools and colleges were receiving modern textbooks; teachers were happy to be participating in teacher-education programmes that international donors and UN agencies were offering. At the university level, many Afghans who had acquired their degrees abroad were teaching a young generation of bright and intelligent boys and girls who were keen to contribute to the development of their country. The human-rights situation was also much better than it was before 2001 under the ferocious Taliban rule.

All these gains are once again in reverse gear – and this reversal is much swifter than anyone could anticipate. Once again, women will be forced to adhere to moral policing set by the Taliban. Girls and women of Afghanistan are once again scared as the Taliban in their previous regime did not allow girls over 10 to go out to seek education in schools, colleges and universities. Both men and women remember the brutal punishments, including public executions, that the Taliban imposed with impunity across Afghanistan in the late 1990s when they had their primary base in Kandahar.

The Taliban have once again seized the country’s second largest city Kandahar and the nearby city of Lashkar Gah. Herat in the west had already fallen to them a week earlier. With more than half of the provincial capitals under their control, it appears to be a matter of weeks before they enter Kabul triumphantly. This situation should be deeply concerning for the rest of the world. Unfortunately, there are many who love to downplay the suggestion that a catastrophe is in the making. The women of Afghanistan – especially the educated and the young – are under imminent threat from the group.

Though the US has sent 3,000 troops to help evacuate its diplomatic staff, it does not intend to do anything regarding the impending crisis in Afghanistan. All talks about actively supporting democracy, backing human rights groups, and promoting gender equity have evaporated in thin air. The airlift by the US reminds many of the airlift in 1975 from Vietnam. Nearly half a century later, history is repeating itself; or is it a broader game plan that we do not comprehend at the moment?

And what is in store for Pakistan, when US President Joe Biden prefers to just ignore this long-term ally? This is a partner whose military dictators from generals Ayub and Yahya to Zia and Musharraf were all eager to offer their services. If the Taliban capture Kabul in September, it will be exactly 25 years since they last entered Kabul in September, 1996. Some assessments by analysts and even ‘strategists’ in Pakistan suggest that the advance of the Taliban to Kabul would be beneficial to Pakistan. Just like they suggested in the 1980s that the advance of the Mujahideen would be all good for Pakistan. The Najibullah government had also tried to bring some positive changes to Afghan society.

But the Mujahideen – who were supported by countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and most of all the UK and US – were loath to it. In the 1980s, the so-called international community was all against a more forward-looking Najibullah, and whole-heartedly supported much more backward-looking and conservative religious forces in the shape of the Mujahideen. Then, even more – or perhaps the most – conservative and regressive forces emerged and wreaked havoc with Afghanistan and other countries. The emergence of Al-Qaeda, Daesh, Hizbut Tahrir, ISIS, the various incarnations of the Taliban and numerous other extremist groups, was a logical corollary of what the ‘international community’ did in the last two decades of the 20th century.

Now the same community must make it clear that power seized through military force is unacceptable. The most affected by this tragedy are women and children, and the world cannot simply look the other way. This conflict has taken a heavy toll on the most vulnerable in Afghan society. The carnage must end now as the people in Afghanistan – and in neighbouring countries, for that matter – have paid the highest price, all while the Western countries have not borne the brunt of this conflict. With dwindling food and medical supplies, Afghan civilians are facing extreme food insecurity.

Critical infrastructure that emerged in the past 20 years is crumbling; schools and clinics are not functioning; and as neighbouring countries keep their borders closed, refugees have nowhere to go but turn to Kabul which itself is not safe. According to UN estimates, in the past month alone civilian loss of life has already crossed a thousand mark, if one just looks at the reported deaths; the actual number is feared to be much more as the details of atrocities are not reaching the outside world.

In the past 40 years, Afghanistan has seen many takeovers; and all appeared to be just makeshift arrangements. The outskirts of the country have largely remained out of Kabul’s writ. If you travel across Afghanistan, you witness mostly scrubland for hundreds of miles, interspersed by villages and towns. Those villages and towns are now once again witnessing fleeing civilians carrying the bare essentials. Just in recent days, over 100,000 people have fled to Kabul and are sleeping on streets with no food or facilities.

As most charity institutions and development organisations funded by international donors have already packed their bags after repeated attacks on them, the displaced are at the mercy of the elements. Nothing short of an immediate ceasefire will stop the fighting. All those smirking or feeling a sense of jubilation need to visualize a child covered blood and a mother crying for her son. If we don’t like to see this in our country, we must oppose this in other countries too, especially in our neighbours’ homes.

So far, only Canada has come up with a plan to settle more than 20,000 vulnerable Afghans. Some other countries including Pakistan are also offering help to journalists and media personnel. These are commendable steps, but this approach – without a broader strategy to counter the Taliban – will further deplete human agency and potential in Afghan society which has lost millions of its bright young people who could have contributed so much to the rebuilding of society. Now in the third decade of the 21st century, this new generation of Afghans needed finances and inspiration to move forward.

The world community has failed them and, what to talk of education and health, these people are looking for shelter anew. The freedoms that they should be growing up with have become a distant dream, the opportunities they longed for have become an illusion. As the world abandons them, how can some people still remain smug?

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