**A humanitarian crisis**

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When the Americans were leaving Afghanistan in August 2021, two kinds of immediate crises were being predicted by everyone who was even remotely connected to Afghanistan.

One, there was clear indication that the return of the Taliban government would induce an unabating socio-political chaos in the country. And two, the country would be catapulted into an economic crisis because of the apparent possibilities of suspension of developmental funds and aids to Afghanistan. But nobody predicted at that time that Afghanistan would face one of the most horrible food and humanitarian crises within a few months.

The severity of the crisis can be gauged from the fact that analysts are expecting more Afghans to die due to this crisis than all Afghan deaths in the 20-year war. The majority of Afghan households have lost some or all of their livelihoods over the past eight months.

Indubitably, the roots of Afghanistan’s crisis can be traced to tight external restrictions on the country’s banking sector and international humanitarian and development funds. In a direct attempt to bowdlerize the Taliban’s access to foreign assets, the US government imposed extremely stringent restrictions on transactions with Afghanistan’s Central Bank. Ever since the Taliban takeover last year, the US government has suspended recognition of Afghanistan’s Central Bank which has practically truncated the country’s economy from the world and severely hampered the payment of essential projects and salaries of millions of government officials, including teachers, health workers and other general workers.

The US has frozen more than $9.5 billion in assets belonging to Afghanistan’s Central Bank. At the same time, apart from impeding international funding, the US has also put the brakes on most of the financial assistance to the development projects there. Even before the departure of the American troops, food insecurity and poverty were already rampant in Afghanistan due to a series of droughts, political instability and the long-drawn-out conflict in the country. But in the months after the Taliban takeover, the crisis has aggravated very swiftly, much to the surprise of all the stakeholders there and outside.

The dwindled foreign development aid that runs into billions of dollars has caused havoc in Afghanistan. Extreme levels of hunger are being faced by the majority of Afghans and more than a million children under five are at a high risk of dying from starvation. According to the International Rescue Committee, Afghanistan is on top of the annual emergency watchlist of countries whose humanitarian crises are expected to worsen expeditiously in the coming months. Though the general law and order situation in Afghanistan is much better, the worsening humanitarian crisis is ringing alarm bells for a major human catastrophe in the coming days.

The Taliban regime is not in a position at all to feed the Afghan people. Hunger is quite evident in every town, every village and every street of Afghanistan. Long queues outside the bread shops and riots over food items in different parts of the country are now a daily routine. Unemployment has also reached unprecedented numbers. The media is rife with videos showing people selling their children for as little as $175. A large number of Afghans are facing this hunger crisis for the first time.

Early this year, the US pledged $308 million in humanitarian assistance for the Afghans. Although miniscule when compared with the minimum requirement of $7 billion to bail out Afghanistan from the existing food crisis, it has provided some ray of hope to the inhabitants of this ill-fated country.

At the same time, to facilitate financial support for some selected educational projects, the Biden Administration also mollified its stance with regard to restrictions on the types of interactions humanitarian organizations can keep with the project managers in Afghanistan. A small group of lawmakers in the US Congress is also trying to persuade their administration to release the frozen assets of Afghanistan through the relevant United Nations agencies to support the health and education programmes in Afghanistan.

The acute food shortage is getting crueler with each passing day. Acute cash shortage and skyrocketing prices of basic items have culminated in a grave socio-economic crisis in Afghanistan. The situation is certainly getting out of hand and will have a spillover effect in the neighboring countries. The international community must play a role in devising a strategy to inhibit this massive human tragedy in the making.

However, the US cannot absolve itself of the responsibility towards whatever is happening in Afghanistan right now. The Biden Administration was well aware of the possible fallout of its tough financial restrictions and asset freezing steps when American troops were withdrawing from Afghanistan in August 2021. Obviously, the main concern of the White House is how to safely transfer the money to the humanitarian organizations in Afghanistan without involving the Taliban and their banking sector. The Americans are quite wary of the possibility of the leakage of the dollars from humanitarian assistance to the Taliban government if they use Afghanistan’s central bank.

The best option is to use the appropriate UN agencies to carry out the humanitarian activities in Afghanistan which is at the brink of a gruesome food and health crisis at the moment. The White House must act now, otherwise it will be much costlier later – financially and morally.

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