**Afghanistan Humanitarian Entente**

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Since May 2021, the US government showed a serious intent to withdraw from Afghanistan. With the Taliban filling the void tactfully, civilians of affected areas started migrating and Kabul saw a heavy influx of internally displaced people. This was all the more exacerbated when finally, Kabul was overtaken with an unexpected speed, beating all data-driven calculations.

Then, the world saw a grotesque situation of desperation, uncertainty and panic as young, old and children rushed to the airport amidst false news of “planes waiting to deport all who wish to go.”

The next days saw youth chasing planes, hanging on to wings and being churned out in the air. There are lessons in this for all who can deliberate.

The stampede continued, uncertainties grew and utter chaos ruled merely to add to the miseries of poor Afghans. Faced with governance challenges and marred by drought, conflict, internal displacement and fear, Afghanistan is now teetering on the verge of a massive humanitarian crisis.

Humanitarian organisations report more than three million people and 80?000 children displaced in the past five months alone. Meanwhile, decreased access to health care, food and shelter; interruption to essential health services; increased health needs directly generated by the conflict, must not be forgotten.

Pakistan is in a unique position to persuade the international community to provide the necessary humanitarian aid.

Before the Taliban takeover, more than 30 per cent of acute people were food-insecure. Now, they are over 50 per cent and could reach 90 per cent by 2022 per the UN report.

Adding to the miseries are the Biden Administration’s decision to freeze $9 billion of Afghanistan reserves, the IMF suspending $460 million, the World Bank halting $5.3 billion, the EU suspending $1.17 billion in aid and the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) terminating $12.9 billion worth of commitments. Low cash availability and high rising commodity prices have become beyond the reach of over 60 per cent of the population.

On August 31, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned of a “humanitarian catastrophe” in Afghanistan and urged donor governments to “dig deep” to fund an emergency flash appeal.

“Donor governments are understandably uneasy about providing assistance and funding to Afghanistan under the Taliban,” said Patricia Grossman, associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

The tragic events send a clear signal that a well-organised, comprehensive humanitarian response should kick off urgently to save human lives in Afghanistan.

We repeatedly hear that “all human lives are equal” but now it is time to see that too.

There could be four critical elements that people at the helm of the international community should consider to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

Firstly, a political-cum-humanitarian entente with Taliban and other stakeholders-especially Pakistan, China, Qatar, Tajikistan, Iran, US, Russia and Uzbekistan-will be required to allow humanitarian aid organisations to operate. The Taliban have stated that they welcome assistance and foreign organisations may continue to operate so long as they respect Islamic enshrines.

Secondly, food, fuel, medicines, shelter and other basic requirements need to be staged for delivery right away as the harsh winter is setting in.

The efficient logistics of assembling and managing a large-scale relief operation is a time- and labour-intensive effort. It would require cooperation among neighbouring countries, Afghan authorities, and relief organizations.

Thirdly, there ought to be adequate financing commitment and disbursement to maintain the humanitarian aid “spigot.” EU generous commitment of 2 billion euros is the right step in the right direction.

In addition, the US should enact a humanitarian waiver to Executive Order 13224, of 2002 that authorises the US government to designate and block assets of suspected terrorist individuals and entities. This assurance will likely encourage humanitarian organisations to continue their on-the-ground operations.

Critical to financing a relief operation is finding a way to salvage the Afghan banking sector, which underpins legal economic activities, as well as potential relief operations. Furthermore, ensuring the regular flow of imports will be paramount given Afghanistan’s dependence on outside resources.

Fourthly, respect for basic human rights, access to health, education and equal employment/ business opportunities be enshrined in the bilateral MoU, between- Taliban & humanitarian actors- that could ensure ample security, access and facilitation of humanitarian operations and health/aid workers.

Pakistan is in a unique position to persuade the international community to provide the necessary humanitarian aid to meet the scale of the disaster facing the Afghan people and do it pretty well.

So far, Pakistan has played a commendable role in facilitating emergency evacuation, transit visas and accommodation for stranded passengers, provision of food, non-food and medicines supply and continued advocacy by civil and military leadership for averting a humanitarian crisis.

Pakistan is better-placed to establish a “corridors of humanitarian assistance” in coordination with other like-minded actors. This could be utilised for the continuation of education, health care, food, shelter and social development activities for Afghanis.

Going further a mechanism for monitoring the compliance of the Taliban’s repeated pledges to prevent the use of Afghan territory by any terrorist entity need to be established. An option might be a United Nations peacekeeping mission, with forces drawn from Muslim majority states. Another one could be an unarmed multilateral observation group modelled on the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.

No country can solve these issues on its own and require regional, global connectivity, continued diplomatic efforts and decisions above one’s comfort bubble.

Politicising humanitarian access and assistance could jeopardize life-saving programs which in turn would put Afghanistan and the region in the vicious cycle of perpetual agonies, which no one can afford.

Meeting humanitarian needs is a strategic and moral imperative and history would judge us by our intent and actions when it was most needed.

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