**Afghanistan matters**

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While the world’s media is focused on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the daily horrors inflicted on Ukrainian civilians caught up in the conflict, there is an even greater tragedy taking place in Afghanistan currently. By greater I do not intend to downplay the terrible suffering of the Ukrainian people but to emphasize that tragedies can vary in their severity, scale, and duration.

Since the Taliban takeover of the country Afghanistan is in a death spiral. Because of lack of jobs and severe drought resulting in crop failure about 20 million people – half the country’s population – are starving for want of adequate nutrition.

One of the few reporters from the West’s mainstream media who has lived and traveled in Afghanistan for over a decade is Sune Engel Rasmussen whose interview in a podcast in April 2022 by the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) is heartrending and gutting in its description of the food shortages there.

According to Mr Rasmussen, the food scarcity situation in Afghanistan is so dire that a single slice of bread costs 10 US cents (or Rs20 in Pakistani currency). Of course, since there are few jobs this is also an unlikely purchase for most Afghans.

In the absence of any income, many Afghans have resorted to desperate measures to make ends meet. According to Mr Rasmussen, “one of the ways that you can make money in Afghanistan if you don't have a job and if you run out of other options is that you can sell either your children, for example, a daughter in marriage, or you can sell organs, body parts. And I have met with many Afghans now who've sold kidneys.”

Apparently there is an active market in the trade of kidneys with the rich benefiting from the sale of body parts by the poor and desperate. Herat is reported to be the center of the organ trade.

The WSJ podcast titled ‘Afghanistan’s desperation economy’ goes on to tell the story of Gul Mohammad a construction worker who lost his job and then, to make ends meet, borrowed money. Mr Mohammad had to make one of two choices to pay off his debt: sell his daughters in marriage or sell his kidney. However, since both he and his wife had medical issues, they were ineligible as kidney donors.

Since the parents couldn’t risk sacrificing the health of their oldest son who supports the 20-member household with his meager daily income, they decided to sell the kidney of their 15-year-old second born son, Khalil. However, Khalil was not told about their decision.

Mr Mohammad received about $4500 from the sale of Khalil’s kidney. That erased his past debts but the result is that Khalil is now no longer the active teenager who used to play football with his friends. He tires easily and feels exhausted much of the time and so stays mostly indoors.

There is no easy solution to stop the sale of body organs by the poor in Afghanistan even though it’s illegal to do so. As Mr Rasmussen points out: “The fact of the matter is that if you're cracking down on the kidney business, you are cracking down on the very, very poorest Afghans in society”.

What is disturbing is the extensive critical coverage by Western mainstream media of the Taliban’s recent decision to mandate that women stepping outside the home should wear the burqa while ignoring the widespread devastation brought about by trade and financial sanctions that have made the lives of the vast majority of the Afghan people a living hell.

Critics of the Taliban often overlook the fact that women (particularly female children) bear the brunt of food shortages faced by households in patriarchal societies such as Afghanistan’s. Thus in a famine female mortality rates spike much higher than those of males. Women obviously need nutritional support before they can get an education and step outside their homes without a male escort.

If the world is waiting for the Taliban to accede to its demands for women’s rights before recognition to the Afghan government then it will have a very long wait.

Think of the situation from the Taliban perspective. (As a negotiator it’s always advisable to put yourself in the other party’s shoes to gain insight). They’ve withstood the mightiest of assaults from the world’s only superpower for as long as two decades.

Taliban strongholds have been relentlessly bombed with the deadliest of non-nuclear munitions including the 21600 pound fuel-air bomb nicknamed the ‘Mother of All Bombs’ that does not destroy armored vehicles but, due to overpressure, rips out the lungs and inner body parts of all living things present within a mile of the blast radius.

Drone attacks have also killed countless civilians that the US government is loath to admit.

Despite the carnage unleashed on the Afghan people by the US military machine as retribution for the 9/11 terrorist attack (in which no Afghan citizen was involved either in planning or execution), the Taliban forces walked into Kabul without any armed resistance in August 2021.

Now as a victor, the Taliban are being asked to change their policies if they wish to have access to the international trade and payments system and to their foreign currency reserves deposited with the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

This is ironic since it’s usually the losers that pay reparations to the winners of a war. Which brings to the fore the point that the Taliban are unlikely to bow before international pressure because it would imply that their sacrifices for two decades were not worth it. Meanwhile, many Afghans will perish because of the famine.

Surely, there are more tyrannical regimes in the world today that torture, disappear, and murder their citizens but have still have gained international acceptability for one reason or another. So why make the Taliban an exception?

There are fundamental security issues involved apart from the humanitarian one as to why Pakistan and the world in general need to engage with the Taliban.

The greatest single security threat to Pakistan today is that of Pak-Afghan cross-border terrorism and asymmetric warfare. Bombing terrorist hideouts is only part of the answer as aerial bombardment inevitably results in the death of non-combatants and further recruitment to the terrorists’ cause.

Dialogue and coordination with the Kabul regime must therefore be part of the answer. This could well mean Pakistan’s official recognition of the Taliban in our national interest. However, since we’re facing an economic and financial maelstrom our decision-makers will be wary of doing this because of the ‘beggars can't be choosers’ syndrome.

Not that Afghanistan will remain isolated for long regardless of how the West feels about the Taliban today. The electric vehicle (EV) revolution will see to that. After 2030, the majority of new vehicles sold will be EVs. Afghanistan’s vast lithium and copper reserves will mean that multinational businesses will be scrambling for business deals there.

Afghanistan’s development to middle-income status in the next two to three decades is, however, conditional on two major factors: (i) internal political stability; and (ii) avoidance of the ‘resource curse’ that has impoverished so many countries with vast mineral and fossil fuel endowments.

Pakistan can also benefit significantly from Afghanistan’s development as Gwadar can become an entrepot for our landlocked neighbour. However, for this to happen we need to ensure that Gwadar has the requisite infrastructure in place and that the cross-border insurgency is quelled.

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