**Afghanistan`s humanitarian disaster**

BY S Y E D I R FA N A S H R A F 2021-11-26

AFGHANISTAN`s humanitarian crisis is about to deepen. It is not only about food scarcity and the looming harsh winter that are coinciding with the continuing systemic violence. The consequences of the lack of regional consensus on how to address the challenge should also be a wake-up call for people in the Af-Pak region and beyond.

The World Food Programme`s executive director, David Beasley, has already cautioned that 22.8 million Afghans -more than half of Afghanistan`s total population of 39m f ace acute food inse curity. They are `marching to starvation` following the fall of Kabul, he said, adding: `Children are going to die.

People are going to starve. Things are going to get a lot worse.` Over 1m Afghan children could die, revealed a recent UN report. No food, no jobs and no escape route, but violence and hunger in abundance to ruin another Afghan generation in Taliban-ruled, landlocked Afghanistan.

Unpaid for months, professionals including professors, doctors and engineers are selling edibles and household items by the roadside. `They cannot teach with an empty stomach,` said protesting teachers in Kabul. More than 150 media organisations have already closed down, according to TOLO News, leaving over 15,000 media workers jobless. The recipients of daily Taliban beatings, some take extreme steps. For instance, a victim of depression, 27-yearold Haroon Niromand hanged himself at his home in Kabul; another, Kamran Ibrahimi, died in a car accident on his way out of Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, people lucky enough to sell their properties have some hope of fleeing the country while the rest live on the bare minimum. CNN reported a father selling his very young daughter to feed the rest of his family members. For how long these predatory practices will persist is anybody`s guess. But within a year, said Kanni Wignaraja, UNDP`s AsiaPacific director, `the poverty rate ... will hover at a whopping 97 per cent or 98pc`.

This situation was not a bolt from the blue but an extension of harmful politics. The tipping point was the 2020 Doha deal between the US and the Afghan Taliban. After the deal was signed, the US ended its two-decade war against Al Qaeda, but handed over the Afghans to the Taliban. Some concessions were drawn from the Taliban, eg the US fixed the schedule for troop withdrawal, and ensured that Afghan soil was not used for terrorism against itself. As a secondary priority, the deal carried details for intra-Afghan talks and an interim set-up. But neither Ashraf Ghani`s government nor the Taliban believed in such halfhearted efforts. While attacks against US troops stopped, Afghans and their state were left at the mercy of Taliban militancy. The consequences of this approach led to Kabul`s f all. As the state crumbled and its functionaries fled abroad, ordinary people were stuck.

The force behind the deal was former US special envoy for Afghanistan reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad. Known for offering simple solutions to complex problems, Khalilzad`s Afghan descent and past ties with militants earned him the sobriquet of `The Taliban`s man in Washington`. In a CBS inter-view, Khalilzad argued that the Taliban`s incapacity to handle Afghanistan was a blessing in disguise. As the US had frozen $9.5 billion of the Afghan central bank`s assets and the World Bank had declined aid to Afghanistan, all-out war is being touted as a solution.

`There should be no release of funds,` Khalilzad said, `So their economy could collapse and in that collapse a new civil war could st art.` The current crisis, therefore, stems from cold strategic calculations to ensure the US stays on top of regional politics.

Not only does the use of economic strangulation as a weapon of control reflect the immoral structure of global politics, it also connects with the predatory character of regional power systems. Because Afghanistan`s neighbours closed their borders within hours of Kabul`s fall, the official blockade of mobility further strangulated the Afghan economy, benefiting those with territorial or air control. At one point, PIA charged $2,600 per ticket from desperate Afghans escaping from Kabul to Islamabad, a flight slightly over one hour. Decades-long instability has not only turned Afghanistan into a backyard for dirty games, but this dark politics seems to stayintact. A visit to an Afghan border crossing reveals the crisis of humanity.

India recently hosted a security dialogue to discuss the Afghan crisis in which delegates from eight countries, including four of Afghanistan`s neighbouring states Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Iran and Russia expressed concerns. Because the Taliban continue to host terrorist groups, the Central Asian states feel threatened, especially by the expansion of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and want a joint front against the threat from Afghanistan. Ironically, some of these regional security czars, especially Russia and Iran, had been supporting the Taliban against Ghani`s relatively stable democratic government, indicating that despite their occasional differences, all regional and global powers are united in destabilising Afghanistan. Lawlessness allows productive outcomes for these rentier states, ranging for hiring proxies (to settle regional scores), to sustaining a war economy feeding militaries and warlords.

Pakistan is unique among these neighbours.

Calling India a `spoiler`, it did not participate in the dialogue and, instead, hosted the so-called Troika Plus comprising China, Russia, the US and the Taliban. While other countries are either distancing themselves from the Taliban or dealing with them cautiously, Pakistan is embracing them, ignoring serious global concerns that hold the militant outfit responsible for Afghanistan`s emerging humanitarian crisis. Worse, Pakistan has contributed to strangulating Afghanistan by closing border crossings for all purposes, while at the same time imploring the world to help Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted: `I have been warning of this humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan`, adding that the world `has moral obligation to avert this humanitarian disaster confronting Afghan ppl`. But for the world to listen to Pakistan, Khan has to first establish his loyalty to his own people. Ruined by the Taliban in the Af-Pak region, Pakhtuns face the fallout from the emerging crisis in a re-Talibanised Afghanistan, therefore providing the state an opening to think about the region in terms outside the existing neocolonial framework.  The writeris the author ofThe Dark Side of News Fixing: The Culture and Political Economy of Global Media in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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