**Dealing with the Afghan crisis**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-12-22

AFGHANISTAN needs more than just emergency humanitarian assistance. The war-ravaged state is on the brink of collapse that could push its entire population into poverty and starvation. The international community may have woken up to the unfolding tragedy yet it has f ailed so f ar to act decisively. Financial sanctions have not only made it extremely dif ficult for aid to reach the people, they could also hasten the looming destruction of the entire system in Afghanistan with catastrophic consequences for the region and beyond.

While Sunday`s extraordinary meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) highlighted the dire prospects of not acting in a timely fashion, the issue of the American financial sanctions has remained unresolved. The foreign ministers` meeting had been convened to discuss and prepare a strategy for dealing with the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. The conference saw over 50 members of the Muslim bloc agreeing to play a leading role in the delivery of humanitarian and development aid to the people of Afghanistan.

It also decided to set up a trust fund which is to be managed by the Islamic Development Bank and be made operational by March next year. It would function in collaboration with other international actors. But the pledge of funds alone cannot prevent the economic collapse of Taliban-administered Afghanistan. In the absence of a clear mechanism, the transfer of funds would remain a stumbling block for the delivery of aid.

The trickling in of international assistance is not enough to prevent the `free fall`as described by the UN under-secretary general for humanitarian af fairs of the economy. A major challenge for the international agencies is how to support basic services such as health, education, electricity and livelihoods. With no access to foreign funding, there is also a problem of paying salaries to state-sector employees.

For the OIC to deal with the crisis, Pakistan has proposed a six-point f ramework. It includes the creation of a financial vehicle for channelling aid, increasing investment in the people of Afghanistan, facilitating Afghanistan`s access to legitimate banking services and easing the liquidity challenge there, improving food security, building the capac-ity of Afghan institutions to counter terrorism and combat illicit trade in narcotics, and engaging with the Taliban with regard to global expectations of an inclusive Afghan set-up.

Indisputably, the proposal contains all the measurers that are needed to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan and ensure liquidity, enabling the relief agencies to respond and save lives. But for that it is essential that frozen Afghan assets of more than $9 billion be released by the US to an appropriate UN agency. More importantly, multilateral financialinstitutions must be allowed to resume aid to the country to avert an economic meltdown.

But the main question is whether the Joe Biden administrationiswilling tosoftenitspositionon the sanctions issue. Or will it choose to punish the Taliban administration? There seems a clear division between the White House and the State Department over dealing with the Afghan crisis.

Although Washington maintains that humanitarian support is separate from politics and has pledged more than $400 million in humanitarian assistance to the Afghans, the financial sanctions have made the delivery of aid extremely problematic.

There is no indication yet that the American restrictions will be lif ted at least not in the immediate future. A major point of contention is that the lifting of sanctions could benefit the Taliban regime, which is unacceptable to the US administration. Then there is also the US law blocking any move to remove or even ease sanctions.

US officials, however, contend that assistance to the Afghan people can still be delivered via some mechanism without violating the sanctions regime.

But such an instrument is quite cumbersome. Using this mechanism, the World Bank`s Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund has approved the transfer of $280m by the end of December to Unicef and the World Food Programme. However, it remains to be seen whether this system can be used for the large-scale delivery of assistance. It leaves the question of liquidity problems unanswered. The economic free f all could be equally catastrophic.

A major issue obstructing any move by the international community to legitimise the conservative regime is the Taliban`s own inflexibility in moderating their position on human and women`s rights.The regime`s ambiguous position on some terrorist groups operating from Afghan soil has been a cause of serious concern even among countries that favour a more positive approach towards the Taliban regime.

There is an emerging consensus in the international community on maintaining an active engagement with the Afghan regime. The OIC foreign ministers` conference also emphasised the need for working closely with the de f acto rulers of Kabul. But the Taliban`s resistance to women`s right to work and access education has been a major roadblock to the regime getting internationallegitimacy.

The world will not accept their excuses on such grave violations of basic human rights. There is also growing international concern over the revenge killings of members of the former government, despite the announcement of amnesty. There have also been questions over the regime continuing to protect terrorist groups like the TTP operating from Afghan soil.

There is an expectation that the OIC could play a role in getting the Taliban regime to sof ten its hardline position on social and human rights issues. The forum also provides Taliban officials an opportunity to explain their position. Surely such interactions are very important to convey the nature of international expectations to the Taliban.

Pakistan`s role in organising the extraordinary session of the OIC and highlighting the unfolding tragedy in Afghanistan has been extremely important. But the prime minister`s remarks on Pakhtun resistance to female education was shocking. He sounded like an apologist for the retrogressive worldview espoused by the Taliban. Such regressive viewpointsarealsoconsideredaninsulttoPakhtuns living in Pakistan. The prime minister`s remarks at an international conference can only encourage the Afghan Taliban to stick to their hard-line positions.

The Afghan Taliban regime will be equally responsible for Afghanistan`s tragedy.  The writeris the author o/No-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

zhussain100@yahoo.com Twitter: @hidhussain