**Ignoring catastrophes**

Abdul Sattar

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As world leaders scramble to deal with the catastrophe in Ukraine, they seem to be ignoring the plight of Yemeni and Afghan people who have been ruined by terrible conflicts. The two war-ravaged states are facing the worst kind of humanitarian disasters of our times, but it seems that the world does not want to pay attention to these people who are victims of regional and international power games.

Yemen continues to suffer because of the ongoing conflict between the Houthi rebels and the internationally recognised government. Large parts of the country have already been destroyed because of the civil war that has been raging for years now. The conflict has badly damaged the country’s infrastructure as belligerent groups targeted schools, hospitals and government buildings, creating hardships for millions of people.

Millions of Yemenis have been plunged into poverty and are being haunted by the spectre of starvation. According to the UN, the war killed more than 377,000 people by the end of 2021 both directly and indirectly through diseases and hunger. Children account for 70 percent of the deaths. Out of the 30 million people, 20 million need humanitarian assistance. The devastating conflict has displaced around four million people.

The World Food Programme (WFP) has described the current level of hunger as unprecedented in the war-torn country where around 17.4 million people are food insecure. Other estimates suggest that more than 22 million Yemenis might face hunger unless emergency funds are provided. The WFP believes that malnutrition rates among women and children remain among the highest in the world with 1.3 million pregnant and breastfeeding women and 2.2 million children under the age of five requiring treatment for acute malnutrition.

The UN fears that three out of four Yemenis will depend on food assistance this year. The global body has stressed that $4.3 billion is needed to address Yemen’s food shortages. But it seems that the US and the West that pumped more than $5 trillion into the ‘war on terror’ do not have this small amount that might alleviate the suffering of Yemenis. Washington, which has spent a whopping $16 trillion over the decades on dangerous nuclear arms and militarisation of the world, is not ready to extend help to the hapless people of Yemen, who are fighting for their survival. The international community that squandered over $1,800 in 2019 on a senseless non-productive sector called defence does not feel the need to be generous towards Yemenis. The result is disastrous; more Yemenis lives would be lost.

The international community is also accused of adopting criminal silence over the plight of Afghan people who are victims of dual oppression. On the one hand, they have a relentless spectre of hunger and starvation, and on the other, they have a new regime which is suppressing their fundamental rights. The WFP says one in three Afghan is hungry today. Around 14 million Afghans face food insecurity. Half of the children might suffer from acute malnutrition. According to Unicef, Afghanistan has one of the world’s highest rates of stunting in children under five: 41 percent. The rate of wasting, the extreme manifestation of severe acute malnutrition, in Afghanistan is extremely high: 9.5 percent. One in three adolescent girls suffers from anaemia.

The country does not have reliable data about unemployment, but in 2015, over 25 percent Afghans were unemployed. Some estimates put a high number of 40 percent. Following the takeover of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban, more than 500,000 people have lost their jobs. But it seems that for the Taliban, the 97 percent of the Afghan population that is living in poverty does not hold any significance. They seem to be turning a blind eye to Afghans who are hit by famines in parts of the country.

Almost 80 percent of Afghanistan’s budget depended on foreign funding, that has been stopped by donors. Also, the US committed the biggest money heist of the modern time by withholding over $5 billion of Afghans, which were kept in the central bank. There is no moral or legal justification for the sole superpower to commit this heinous crime that amounts to pushing Afghans towards hunger and starvation. It is also surprising as to why the UN and other international bodies are silent over this criminal act that would affect millions of the people in the already war-torn country.

The US and its allies are partly responsible for the destruction of the landlocked country that has been a victim of foreign intervention for decades. It was London, Paris, Washington and other Western capitals that threw their support behind the extremists in Afghan society to defeat the then Soviet Union and indoctrinated Afghans with the global jihadist ideology that tore the social fabric of Afghan society, besides plunging the country into a vicious trap of death and destruction. It was the West that encouraged retrogressive elements of Afghan society to curb women’s rights and violate the basic norms of decency. Now they cannot get away with this. They have a responsibility to rebuild the country that they destroyed.

It is not only the international community that is responsible for the plight of Afghans, but the Taliban and other Afghan factions should also share the blame. For the Taliban, gender segregation is the answer to the woes of the Afghan people. They are more interested in allocating separate places for women in parks, barring girls from attending schools, closing down women-owned businesses and preventing them from travelling abroad without a male chaperon than addressing hunger. For them, moral policing is the only way to stop hunger and starvation. They tend to believe that shutting down women-owned businesses will alleviate the miseries of millions of Afghans.

The corrupt Afghan leadership that siphoned off billions of dollars is also responsible for the plight of Afghans. Had they delivered honestly and spent massive funds that poured into the country in the aftermath of the Taliban’s toppling, the country would not have any supporters for the group who has been imposed on the people. They might claim to have an impeccable character, but their foreign accounts and luxurious lifestyle fly in the face of such claims. While the majority of the people remained poor, the Afghan ruling elite managed to multiply its wealth.

But the world should move beyond this game. The international community has a duty to help the Afghan people. The Taliban are a reality for now. They must be engaged to ensure that the people of this unfortunate country do not suffer from hunger and starvation. Saner elements in the conservative government of Kabul should prevail upon the conservative who do not seem to be bothered by the mundane issues of food, health and education.

The Kabul regime should not use a ban on girls’ education or curbs on women’s freedom as a bargaining chip. Whether the international community listens to the Taliban or not is a different issue. Such an issue should not blind them from the fact that Afghan women are also entitled to get education, work, claim public spaces and participate in politics. They do not need any certificates from the clerics of Kandahar to prove that they are equal citizens of the country.

Email: egalitarianism444@gmail.com

The writer is a freelance journalist.