**On the brink of catastrophe**

BY Z A H I D H US S A I N 2021-11-25

IT has now been 100 days of Taliban 2.0 rule in Afghanistan. But the situation there is far from stable. While the war has ended, the country is now on the brink of a human catastrophe. With the advent of winter, millions of people are facing `crisis levels of hunger`.

A humanitarian disaster is unfolding in Afghanistan that is bound to have far-reaching implications that will not be limited to the war-ravaged country. According to a recent UN report, around 60 per cent of Afghanistan`s 38 million people will be affected by the impending food crisis.

Only 5pc of the population has enough to eat. The situation will worsen as emergency humanitarian aid is delayed.

Some international assistance has started trickling in but it is not enough to deal with the enormous crisis. A large part of the country remains inaccessible in winter. It`s not just hunger and starvation; the lack of basic healthcare facilities too has added to the enormity of the crisis.

The continuing international isolation of the conservative regime has made the situation more complicated. It has been over three months since the Afghan Taliban took power following the exit of the American forces and the subsequent collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government. Yet there is no indication of them getting formal recognition beyond active engagement.

The failure to make the set-up more inclusive and to restore women`s right to work and allow them access to education has remained a major reason for the regime not getting diplomatic acceptance.

Although the United States and some other countries have announced the delinking of humanitarian assistance from the question of recognition, continuing financial sanctions on the Taliban regime have thwarted efforts to provide emergency aid to the people.

Washington`s decision to freeze the Afghanistan central bank`s $9 billion in reserves, most of which are held in the US, has brought the country close to economic collapse. Imposed soon after the Taliban takeover, the financial sanctions have also affected the regime`s access to funds allocated by the IMF and World Bank. The multilateral agencies have blocked the release of funds because of the `lack ofclarity` surrounding the new government.

That has raised fears of a collapse of the banking system that is already under tremendous stress.

According to a UN report, Afghanistan`s economy has already shrunk by 40pc, worsening the plight of the Afghan people. The virtual collapse of the banking system has added to the problems of the relief agencies in getting aid to the people. They are now struggling to get enough cash into the country.

The European Union, the US and other countries have pledged over a billion dollars for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. But the funds cannot be availed because of financial restrictions. The UN has asked for international intervention to prevent the complete collapse of Afghanistan`s banking system. Russia, China and some other countries have also called upon the US to unfreeze the Afghan central bank`s reserves to halt the impending disaster.

Domestic political pressure and fear that the unfreezing of reserves could strengthen the Taliban government are the major reasons behind the Biden administration`s imposition of financial restrictions. American officials also cite some legal issues that make it difficult to remove the restrictions.

But the collapse of the formal banking system as a consequence of the sanctions could have disastrous implications for the war-torn country. The UN special envoy for Afghanistan in a recent report has warned that the `paralysis of the banking sector will push more of the financial system into unaccountable and unregulated informal money exchanges...`. That seems to be already happening.

The report further said that it could only help `facilitate terrorism, trafficking and further drug smuggling`. That would certainly have effects beyond Afghanistan. The looming prospect of economic collapse is the biggest challenge for the new Taliban government, which has still not settled in.

Economic collapse would cause further instability in Afghanistan to the advantage of terrorist groups such as the so-called Islamic State that is already active and has intensified its terrorist attacks in the country. There are other terrorist groups too operating in the country and threatening regional security.

This situation also presents a serious dilemma tothe international community: the collapse of the Taliban regime could lead to renewed civil war in Afghanistan with regional countries getting sucked into it. That could turn the fear of Afghanistan once again becoming a haven for transnational terrorist networks into reality.

Such a dire prospect has also been the reason why Russia, China and other regional countries have been calling for active and supportive engagement with the Taliban government. It may also be a reason for the Biden administration to soften its position. This week, the State Department announced that it was working closely with the UN and other countries to `find ways to offer liquidity to infuse` so long as international support does not flow to the Taliban. US officials are hopeful that a mechanism can be evolved without removing the financial sanctions. But it remains to be seen whether such measures can help prevent the impending humanitarian catastrophe.

More worrisome are reports that starvation and the worsening economic situation could force more Afghans to leave the country. The UN refugee agency has recently warned that by the end of 2021, the humanitarian crisis could displace half a million more Afghans. Many of them would be seeking refuge in neighbouring countries including Pakistan and Iran. Between them, the two coun tries are already hosting millions of Afghan refugees.

There is a need for a strong global response to deal with the impending human catastrophe in Afghanistan. Humanitarian aid must be kept separate from politics. An economic collapse could worsen the plight of the Afghan people.

The Taliban regime must also fulfil its responsibilities to end international isolation. The world is not willing to accept a retrogressive regime that does not ensure the basic human rights of the people. The regime`s rigidity threatens not only the stability of Afghanistan but also the lives of the people.  The wateris the author o/No-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

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