**When the mighty take to thievery**

Raoof Hasan

Friday, Feb 18, 2022

The sordid story of the past twenty-one years when the world’s so-called sole superpower destroyed Afghanistan, first with the rattle of its bombs and then with the devastation wreaked by deceit and corruption, has few parallels in history. Even more surprising is the fact that all this was happening during the times of information explosion with nothing remaining secret.

When the US invaded Afghanistan, it was with the motive of ‘liberating’ it from terror and its perpetrators. When they left in an unparalleled hurry, much of the country had been reduced to a wasteland. This followed the signing of a deal with the very forces the US had originally set out to decimate. In between is a period when Afghanistan was reduced to being the playground for conducting countless experiments in democracy, human rights, rights of women and the sundry.

The one experiment the aggressor succeeded in implementing was about introducing a variety of corruption forms. This is all encapsulated in 'The Afghanistan Papers', now available in book form by Craig Whitlock, with each page a treatise of shame for the occupiers. It makes for harrowing reading regarding how the US remained at war with the truth throughout its stay in Afghanistan and how persistently it was engaged in dismantling the inherent value system the Afghans have been the torch-bearers of through centuries.

Having failed to put a permanent stranglehold around the country and eventually forced to leave, the US took to breeding conflict and disharmony among its people. It tried to wreak economic devastation by denying Afghanistan access to its assets as also imposing restrictions on the functioning of its financial institutions, thus restricting support from other countries, international institutions and donor organisations. Consequently, the Afghan people have been driven to the brink of a massive humanitarian crisis they have since been trying to cope with, though with meagre success.

The US has now dropped the most lethal of bombs yet. The Biden Administration has decided that only half of the assets claimed by the Taliban government valued at $7 billion will be reserved for the Afghan people, to be distributed through a mechanism to be finalised later, and the other half will be given to those affected by the 9/11 attacks. This is daylight robbery. This is as if the richest and the mightiest power in the world is out scavenging bits and morsels which may have been left behind in the country after being subjected to twenty-one years of unremitting mauling. This has no precedence. This has no parallel in civilised history. It could be a chapter from the forbidden archives which the US has decided to practice simply to cause further pain to the people who ousted their aggression. It appears that even the tatters they left behind are not acceptable as the US remains on a revenge course to deprive Afghanistan of the last remnants of sustenance it may still have access to.

It is further understood that the disbursal of $3.5 billion for Afghanistan “would be strictly monitored” and it will be ensured that “it is not going to the Taliban. It will be used for the benefit of the Afghan people”. To pour salt on wounds, the US government will ascertain what is of benefit to the Afghan people and what is not. Can there be a graver travesty of justice?

The decision has been widely and bitterly criticised. The Afghan government has strongly condemned the unjustified actions as “a violation of the rights of the Afghans”. It further said that “the 9/11 attacks had nothing to do with Afghans. Under the pretext of this incident, any misappropriation of the property of the Afghan people is considered as blatant aggression and cruelty which is in clear contradiction of the agreement reached with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”. The spokesperson for the Taliban political office in Qatar said on Friday that the seizure of Afghanistan Bank’s reserves was “theft” and a sign of “moral decay”.

Pakistan has reiterated its principled position on the frozen Afghan central bank assets in the US saying that “these are owned by the Afghan people and should be released”. The Foreign Office spokesperson further stated that “the utilisation of these funds should be the sovereign decision of Afghanistan”. It was also said that finding ways to unfreeze Afghan reserves urgently would help address the humanitarian needs of the Afghan people.

The advocacy adviser of Human Rights Watch, John Sifton, has written that the act “would create a problematic precedent for commandeering sovereign wealth and do little to address underlying factors driving Afghanistan’s massive humanitarian crisis”.

So blinded are the Americans in their vengeful ways that they have lost sight of sanity. They may hold back $3.5 billion, or the entire $7 billion; they may impose even more draconian sanctions on the Taliban; they may block their access to banking channels and other remedial avenues and further accentuate the sufferings of the Afghan people, but they must understand that there is no alternative to the Taliban yet. The Americans should also not forget that, notwithstanding their extremely harried ouster, the Taliban are there on account of the very agreement they had signed with them regarding the terms of their ultimate withdrawal. The act of negotiating with the Taliban to the exclusion of the government in Kabul was conceding legitimacy to the group which assumed control in the wake of the US withdrawal.

The Americans should also realise that, in the recent past, Afghanistan was never as united and peaceful as it has been since the Taliban takeover. There is no rebellion brewing anywhere in Afghanistan, there is much less terrorism-related activity and people appear to have espoused the new regime. The Taliban are committed to establishing an inclusive government, respecting human rights and granting rights to women for education and work, but they want some further time to implement the decisions. So, there is little credible reason why they should be targeted through actions which are detrimental for the entire Afghan population. One’s antipathy towards the Taliban should not be turned into hatred for the entire Afghan nation.

This dastardly act has gravely dented whatever was left of the US integrity, reputation and stature. It has come down from the grandiose pedestal that it claimed was its exclusive domain. It is already near the bottom and continues to plunge further. It has come to this pass simply because the US remains wrapped in layers of arrogance. It is a classic case of the mighty taking to petty thievery chasing the measly morsels meant to save precious human lives. A damning fall, indeed!

The writer is the special assistant to the PM on information, a political and security strategist, and the founder of the Regional Peace Institute. He tweets @RaoofHasan