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**Talking to angry people**

“When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you.” – Winston Churchill It was in a speech during his recent visit to Gwadar that Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that he was thinking of initiating a dialogue with such insurgents in Balochistan who had not been used by India for conducting subversive activities in Pakistan. In its meeting held a day later on July 6, the federal cabinet authorised the prime minister to go ahead with holding talks to bring the angry Baloch tribes into the mainstream of national polity.

This is not the first time that such an effort would be initiated by the government. There have been many attempts made earlier also, the most recent one being by Dr Abdul Malik when he was the chief minister of the province. Reportedly, some progress was made but, because of his replacement with Nawab Sanaullah Khan Zehri to head the government during the second half of the tenure, the talks remained inconclusive.

The history of insurgency in Balochistan is not new. Spread over many decades, it has mostly exploited the impoverishment of the Baloch people to incite violence. While some demands may have merit, the disaffection has been used by inimical forces, both within and outside, to stir agitation against the state which has resulted in the loss of faith and precious lives. This has also blocked the initiation of welfare projects that would have benefited the marginalised and the needy people of the province.

The spate of insurgency has swelled since the advent of development activities in the province undertaken as part of the China-Pakistan partnership. It could well be an international effort, fully supported by some regional powers, to stymie the development of Pakistan, particularly where the Chinese are its partners. The development of Gwadar into a deep-sea port is a key flagship project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which has potential to transform the fate of the country and help it become the gateway to the West.

The germs of disaffection may have lingered for some years earlier, but the issue came to a head with the dismissal of the elected government of Sardar Ata Ullah Mengal in 1973 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This led to the resignation of the NAP-JUI coalition government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The mass-scale arrests of their top leadership provided an opportunity to the Baloch separatists to unite under one banner and take to the mountains to launch armed resistance against the federal government. The uprising was quelled by 1978 with the grant of general amnesty, withdrawal of the Hyderabad Conspiracy Case and release of all detainees.

As a consequence of the succeeding governments’ inability to address the core issues that spurred the rebellion, the frustrations of the Baloch people have intensified and have been exploited by the insurgents and their local and foreign sponsors. What was required was a comprehensive programme to uplift the province and its people out of poverty and put them on a par with the rest of the country. That, unfortunately, has only been confined to speeches and action plans with little real time progress on their implementation. The difficulties faced by the people have not been redressed and their sense of deprivation has accentuated with the passage of time.

While the military has acted within the constraints of the constitution to defend the integrity and unity of the federation, use of force does not provide a sustainable solution. This will come by initiating a broad-based dialogue with the disgruntled elements and incentivising them by remedying their genuine grievances and helping them along to commence playing their role in the political domain of the province and the country. Special focus must be paid to encouraging the Baloch people to get rid of their deeply-ingrained feeling of deprivation and injustice. Unless that happens with a sense of purpose and continuity, there is no way they would be able to get over their feelings of estrangement from the federation.

Prime Minister Imran Khan’s resolve to initiate such a dialogue with insurgents who do not have a connection with Indian sponsors augurs well for the welfare of the most deprived province of the country and its people. It is as daring as one expects of a leader of Imran Khan’s mettle who has unwavering faith in the uplift of Pakistan and its future. More importantly, it is a step taken with Pakistan’s interest in mind, with Pakistani people’s interest in mind. If pursued in earnest, this one step would redress the grievances of decades and unite everyone under the banner of ‘one Pakistan, one people’.

But, this should not be a short stint activity. It must be an ongoing effort directed towards uplifting the province and giving its people the confidence that their interests are paramount on the priority list of the provincial and federal governments. Multi-sector activities, some of which are envisaged in the CPEC planning, should be initiated with the consultation and participation of the local population and their leadership so that they could develop a feeling of trust and involvement and look forward to benefiting from these. If we are able to do that, we have won half the battle. The rest will come along as the fruits of development activities begin leaving their positive impact on the lives of the people.

Much has gone wrong in the past of which there are piles stacked around. All this cannot be remedied in one burst. It will come slowly, but the process must begin without any further loss of time and it must be taken hence with unflinching consistency and commitment. Balochistan is destined to be a key constituent of the national strategy to combat these challenging times when inimical forces are primed to assault Pakistan’s core interests. Internal unity will have to be cultivated to thwart both local and foreign interventions. The enemies outside will be able to hurt us only if there is disunity within. Because of rabid neglect spread over decades and a continuing divisive role being played by some forces, forging internal unity is not going to be an easy task, but it is a task which must be undertaken in earnest.

Balochistan always was and remains a distinctive jewel embedded in the Pakistani crown. It must shine and sparkle as one. It is only when the province and its people progress that Pakistan will move forward. That responsibility lies with the provincial government, the federal government and every Pakistani who has faith in the virtues of equity, equality and justice for all.

Let Balochistan lead the charge. Pakistan shall prosper.

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