US special envoy & Afghan leaders discuss peace process

US special peace envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad in his visit to Kabul has met with President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and other Afghan government officials. In the meeting between President Ghani and Zalmay Khalilzad, continued political, diplomatic, security, defense and economic cooperation were discussed. The US delegation led by US special peace envoy for Afghanistan by pointing to US proposed $3.3 billion assistance to Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) reiterated of the US administration's continued support to ANDSF particularly the Afghan air force, economic and human rights sector.

The delegation has said that US will make effort towards an independent, united, impartial, democratic and peaceful Afghanistan, where all achievements of the past two decades are protected and strengthened.

In the meeting, the US special envoy for Afghanistan has said his country is firmly supporting the peace process as effort is underway towards creating consensus in support of peace in world and regional level, adding that it is time that all sides to the ongoing conflict reduce violence and resume serious peace talks.

It is now time for the Taliban group to stop bloodshed and say "yes" to permanent ceasefire in the country. Afghan political experts believe that there are three options to break the current deadlock in peace talks. "Firstly, the US special envoy for Afghanistan reconciliation can at least convince the Taliban group to say "yes" for the ceasefire. Secondly, good to talk with Islamabad or exert pressure on the government of Pakistan to bring the Taliban group for peace talks. The third option is war," Afghan experts said.

If all sides to ongoing conflict enter to peace talks, there will be lots of issues which should be considered.

For example, the demands and visions of the Afghan people, permanent ceasefire, guaranteeing of the republic system, protection of human rights and women rights and others need to be considered and debated in peace talks with the Taliban group. For now, there is international consensus for Afghanistan peace and all countries are against military solution of the dispute. The international consensus is aimed to help Afghanistan reach lasting peace and stability. The world countries have agreed on peace talks as efforts are underway for acceleration of peace efforts so that the Afghan government and Taliban resume talks as soon as possible. Starting meetings between officials of Afghanistan and Pakistan, demand of US, Germany and other countries as India, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, UAE and Saudi Arabia for resumption of peace talks have shown that all countries have reached to a conclusion that continued war in Afghanistan will result in increasing insecurities in the region. Therefore, there is both regional and international consensus for Afghanistan peace. This comes amid of increasing insecurities and Taliban attacks in almost all provinces of the country.

Lailuma Noori

Energy drinks induced health issues

Writer: Ahmad Khan

Many adults and adolescents buy and consume energy drinks during festive events, exam nights, and during and before exercise. Energy drinks are caffeinated non-alcoholic beverages. Besides caffeine, energy drinks generally have other ingredients, such as sugars, vitamins, and non-nutritive stimulants, besides the main ingredients. Additional components can be botanical extracts, food colors, and flavoring.

Consumption of classic sugar-sweetened beverages such as carbonated soft drinks and fruit juice has decreased in most countries. On the other hand, globally, the consumption of energy drinks since their introduction in the 1960s has increased due to fancy ads and buzz words in advertisements that can drive adolescents and young adults to partake (Hammond & Reid, 2018). For example, in the United States of America, energy drink intake rose from 0.5% to 5.5% among young adults between 2003 and 2016. In addition, a recent study found that a survey age group of ages 12 to 24 indicated that 73.6% of participants in the survey report that caffeine intake contained energy drinks at least once (Vercammen et al., 2019).

Furthermore, people often consume more than one energy drink. For example, a survey from Canada showed that 16% of consumers had more than two energy drinks at once, which practically exceeds the daily recommended dose of caffeine. As a result, it can lead to adverse effects (Reid et al., 2017). For example, in the USA, emergency room visits have grown from 10,068 visits in 2007 to 20,783 visits in 2011 due to the adverse effects of caffeine-containing energy drinks.

Country to country regulations on energy drinks' ingredients, labeling, and health warnings vary widely. Some countries have lenient requirements, which leads to no restrictions on energy drinks companies' ads.

They can say whatever they would like regarding their brand and its performance effects on the human body. On the other hand, some countries have restrictions on energy drink companies.

They do not permit them to outline the performance effect that their products may not contribute or provide. Moreover, the absence of strict regulation results in aggressive advertisements showing incredible performance effects. In addition, discounted prices are one of the most potent determinants which influence young adults and adolescents to buy more energy drinks, and it has enhanced their dominance in the beverage industry's marketing.

So far, they are not many studies on the long-term effects on human health, but some studies show the short-term effects of energy drinks. This paper includes the effects of caffeine, sugar, and ginseng. On some of the ingredients, such as glucuronolactone, few studies have been done. Thus, our knowledge of this substance is inadequate to conclude whether this substance is harmful or beneficial.

Caffeine:

Public health concerns are increasing regarding high caffeine in energy drinks. Most common energy drinks contain between 70 to 200 mg of caffeine per serving. *Caffeine* is an ergogenic substance that can increase heart rate and blood pressure. Also, moderate ingestion of caffeine has ergogenic effects on athletes' performance. For example, it can improve athletes' endurance when caffeine is taken before and during exercise (Ganio et al., 2009). In addition, caffeine can contribute to the mobilization of fatty acid and enhance stimulation of working muscle to use fat as the source of energy that delays the reduction of muscle glycogen and permits prolonged exercises.

Adverse events of caffeine typically appear when an individual adult ingests more than 200 mg (per Health Canada, recommended maximun daily dose for children age 10 to 12 is 85 mg) of caffeine and the manifestation of the adverse effects are headache, sleeplessness, nervousness, irritation, tachycardia, nausea, arrhythmia, stroke, and death (Al-shaar et al., 2017).

Some studies indicate that it is still unclear which ingredient or combination of components contributes to the reported adverse events related to the energy beverages ingestion (Basrai et al., 2019).

Ginseng:

Even though the Food and Drug Administration in the United States has not approved ginseng, people still use this well-known traditional herb for different purposes that are not research proven, such as increasing energy, memory, and relieving stress. In addition, athletes use ginseng to enhance their performance in sports.

All side effects of ginseng or not known yet. However, some people might develop severe skin reactions, fever, sore throat, swelling of face, or tongue burning sensation. Other common side effects might include diarrhea, insomnia, sleeplessness, headache, palpitation, blood pressure disorder, breast tenderness, and vaginal bleeding.

Sugar:

Another essential ingredient of energy drink is sugar. One can contain approximately 54 g of sugar, a teaspoon of sugar might weigh about 4 g, so typically a can of energy drink contains about 13 teaspoons of sugar. The long-term impact of the body on excessive simple sugars is associated with obesity, insulin resistance, and finally, diabetes.

It is essential to note that even though some studies have indicated positive effects of energy drinks on endurance in exercise performance, other studies have shown that energy drinks do not impact the exercise performance of athletes. For example, in a study that included 19 professional female volleyball players, energy drink consumption did not significantly impact grip strength, vertical jump, and anaerobic power (Fernanedez-Campos et al.,2015).

To answer the question of why some studies showed a positive impact on the physical exercise of athletes and some studies did not show any effect, it may be that the variations in subjects, gender, the dose of caffeine, and other components of energy drinks might have caused the inconsistency in the results.

Energy Drinks in Afghan culture:

In Afghanistan, the culture of consumption of green tea or black tea is common; people usually take green or black tea several times during the day. Green tea and black tea have caffeine (green tea about 35 mg caffeine per cup and black tea 39-109 mg caffeine per cup), and to add energy drink consumption on top of the daily intake of caffeine from green tea and black tea can quickly put people at the risk of caffeine overdose. Thus, people should consider the quantity when consuming green tea and energy drinks to avoid the risk of caffeine overdose.

In the Afghan community, energy drinks are considered drinks that help people, and the TV ads regarding energy drinks do not provide any warning signs or age limit. Sometimes families might encourage or let their children consume caffeine-containing drinks such as Pepsi, Coca-Cola, and different energy drinks brands. Per the American Association of Pediatrics, energy drinks can pose potential risks to the health of children and adolescents and should never be consumed by them. Local health authorities need to remind the energy drink companies to highlight that it is not safe for children to have caffeine-containing energy drinks in their ads and labeling.

Conclusion:

Parents, doctors, coaches, and teachers should take the initiative to address the issues of energy drinks with young adults, patients, athletes, and students in informing them about the effects and risks, as well as the main ingredients of many energy drinks such as caffeine, glucuronolactone, ginseng, and sugar. Parents, especially, should not allow their children to have energy drinks.

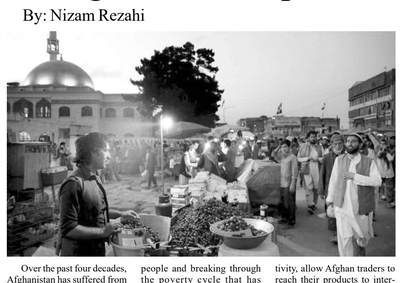
Studies have shown the adverse effects of excessive caffeine consumption. However, the positive results and long-term effects of some ingredients of energy drinks are still not proven.

Limited consumption of energy drinks by healthy adults is less likely to cause significant adverse effects (Higgins et al., 2010). However, people with medical diseases, especially heart disease, should always consult with their doctors before consuming energy drinks.

Therefore, people need to be cautious, and if they decide to consume energy drinks, they have to drink responsibly.

A transition era towards a vibrant and prosperous Afghanistan: Op-Ed

By: Nizam Rezahi



Over the past four decades, Afghanistan has suffered from prolonged imposed war and internal conflicts, adversely affecting the country on different fronts. Displacement and mass migration to the neighboring countries and beyond, lack of quality education system, paralyzed healthcare services, dire poverty, and hunger are the consequences of the never-ending war in the country. Afghan people have experienced the worst possible situation under different political regimes backed by foreign counties. Despite the overwhelming problems, Afghans stood firm with resilience against the chaotic conditions inspired to achieve lasting peace and a better future.

Since the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the establishment of the democratic government, the country has undergone a substantial transition period in specific domains. With the continuous support of the international community and donor nations, Afghanistan has experienced unprecedented development in education, healthcare, economy, telecommunication, transportation, regional and international trade, and more. Most importantly, the ongoing intra-Afghan peace talks and reconciliation process makes people hopeful for a brighter future and peaceful life.

Uplifting the education sector of Afghanistan has been an essential priority for the international community. The educational programs and initiatives of international NGOs and the Afghan government have drawn massive investment in improving the education quality and building educational infrastructures across the country.

The number of students attending schools and universities of private and public sectors has substantially increased over the years. A significant rise in female students with outstanding academic performances is promising—indicating that the demand for education is rapidly growing in Afghanistan.

These are encouraging signs which play a crucial role in shaping the future of the young generation.

Empowering individuals through education is the most appropriate strategy in uplifting the living conditions of people and breaking through the poverty cycle that has trapped Afghans for decades.

Furthermore, internet connectivity and telecommunication services have improved to a great extent. Domestic and international telecommunication companies (Roshan, Afghan Wireless, MTN, Etisalat, Salaam, tec.) have accordingly offered communication and internet services. Today, a large majority of people benefit from internet services at different levels. The increase in internet connectivity has helped Afghan people to remain connected to the rest of the world and avoid the isolation that left the country in the shadow of illiteracy, tyranny, and poverty for countless years.

The dissemination of information and knowledge-sharing technologies has experienced a remarkable period over the years. Afghans have benefited from the availability of rich information brought forward through sources online and offline. More specifically, college and university students have extensively utilized such sources in implementing their research projects and academic works. Currently, students have access to journals, educational websites, and research articles from universities worldwide. Now more than ever before, Afghans have the chance to find prestigious scholarships and take distance courses offered by renowned universities.

The advancement of information sharing and communication has revolutionized the teaching and learning approaches among enthusiastic Afghan men and women.

Besides being an import-based economy in nature, the country's economy gradually increases incremental improvements across different areas such as agricultural products, services, and foreign investment in mining, construction, infrastructure sectors, and more. Finding alternative routes of doing trade with regional and international partners is another opportunity that helps the country boost its trade relations.

Lageward and Chabahar are two new routes that facilitate export and import rather effectively to global markets. These new routes minimize the country's over-reliance on Karachi port, increase connectivity, allow Afghan traders to reach their products to international markets on time, and avoid unnecessary details.

Meanwhile, the transportation sector has gone through significant improvements. Since the establishment of the democratic government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2003, several thousand-kilometer roads have been asphalted. Construction companies funded by NGOs and the international community have done a fantastic job to build roads across the country, notably in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and other provinces.

Most importantly, peace negotiations with the Taliban excite the Afghan people more than anything else. Afghans suffered imposed wars for decades and fought hard for sustainable and dignified peace for their country. There is a high contingency that the Taliban will compromise with the government on making a peace deal through a political settlement. Hopefully, the peace process would yield positive outcomes because all parties have lost enough resources and are exhausted from the ongoing war. Killing innocent people and confronting one another on the battlefield is not the ultimate solution to the Afghan war. Thus negotiations seem a viable option for bringing a permanent peace that includes all parties.

The optimism created makes Afghan people hopeful for a better future with boundless opportunities on the horizon and peace on the forefront. Afghan people have demanded peace for decades but failed to achieve it due to foreign interventions in Afghanistan's internal affairs and more. In addition to all the uncertainties and ongoing issues, improvements are expected to occur and quick start the peace process. This transition period should be embraced and taken as the starting point of a new beginning. It has already laid the foundation for significant changes and development in the country in the years ahead. With sound strategic plans, there is a lot more to achieve, leading the country towards economic prosperity and self-reliance in the long term.

This article also appeared in Khaama Press news agency.