Can the UN push Afghanistan and the Taliban back to the negotiating table?

KABUL: "There is only one acceptable direction for Afghanistan – away from the battlefield and back to the negotiating table," the U.N.'s top envoy for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, said in briefing this week to the U.N. Security Council.

Lyons, who heads the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) urged the council, in conjunction with countries in the region, to "do all it can to push" the Afghan government and the Taliban back to the negotiating table.

"The tragic history of conflict need not repeat itself — but left to its own and our inertia it just might."

President Joe Biden decided in April to finally end the U.S. war in Afghanistan by removing American troops by the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks this September. But the war in Afghanistan won't end with the U.S. withdrawal.

Right the April announcement, Lyons said, "sent a seismic tremor through the Afghan political system and society at large." Although the decision was expected, the speed of the withdrawal was not.

Back in 2014, then-President Barack Obama announced his plan to withdraw U.S. troops, plotting a two-year timeline for the process that would mark the end of the U.S. "combat mission" in the country. When Obama left office, the roughly 8,400 U.S. troops still in the country were officially on a train, advice, and assist mission — ostensibly helping the Afghans fight the Taliban, and by then, nascent Islamic State elements. As Jessica Donati covered in her recent book, "Eagle Down: The Last Special Forces Fighting the Forever War" the shift in mission didn't mean that no U.S. troops were involved in combat, but it was a convenient way to keep Afghanistan out of domestic headlines.

In early June, U.S. Central Command estimated that more than 50 percent of the withdrawal process had been completed, including the formal handover of six facilities to the Afghan Ministry of Defense and removal of thousands of pieces of equipment. The Biden administration maintains that it will stage forces "over the horizon" to provide counterterrorism and other support to the Afghan government, but aside from the Persian Gulf it's not clear where U.S. forces will find a welcoming staging ground. The Taliban have already warned Afghanistan's neighbors about hosting foreign forces.

Lyons, in her briefing to the Security Council, noted that the withdrawal was one of four parts of the February 2020 agreement between the United States and the Taliban. She noted that the agreement "generated hope that it would create the space for a peace to be made among Afghans."

"The foreign troops would be gone, and therefore, rather than fighting one another, Afghans would have the opportunity to come together and find a path to peace," Lyons continued. "But instead, actions on the battlefield have been far greater than progress at the negotiating table."

Lyons noted that more than 50 of Afghanistan's 370 districts, many surrounding provincial capitals, had fallen since May to the Taliban. However, as RFE/RL journalist Frud Bezhan highlighted on Twitter recently, the Taliban capture of districts gets more media attention than the government's swift retaking of the same districts. This isn't to underestimate the violence or the precariousness of control in any given area, or overestimate the Afghan government's capabilities, but rather to emphasize that the future is deeply uncertain. As the U.S. withdrawal progresses, the Taliban have been reluctant to come to the negotiation table, but instead the group is militarily positioning itself.

Lyons stressed that the Taliban continuing their "intensive military campaign would be a tragic course of action" and lamented that the hoped-for conference in Istanbul to "accelerate the stalled negotiations" didn't work out. Per Lyons' telling, the Afghan government was prepared to attend but the Taliban never officially responded.

Regarding the Afghan government, Lyons acknowledged that a "lack of unity" in Kabul was alarming. "While some of the shortcomings in Government are part of a legacy of putting politics above governance, the lack of unity must be addressed or risks contributing to further Taliban territorial advances," she said.

Meanwhile, many have urged the UNAMA to "play a greater role in the peace process," Lyons said, and "we are prepared and equipped to do so if the parties commit to real negotiations and agree together on a role for the U.N."

Absent real engagement by the Taliban with the negotiation process, and a lack of unity within the Afghan government, what can the United Nations do?

Lyons mentioned working with countries in the region, which "share grave concerns about an extended and fragmented conflict in Afghanistan" including "refugee flows, migrant movement, increased drug smuggling, terrorism, and lost opportunities for economic connectivity and mutually beneficial trade." The U.N. and the international community have the capacity to address some of the concerns, but as Lyons said, "We must accept the reality — increased conflict in Afghanistan means increased insecurity for many other countries, near and far."

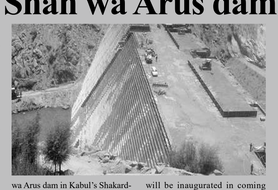
Water intake begins at Kabul's Shah wa Arus dam

Water intake has begun at Shah wa Arus dam, located in Kabul's Shakardara district. A number of residents of Shakardara by welcoming the start of intaking water at the dam say they witness this after along time. They said Afghans have been facing with drought for the past few year in various parts of the country; therefore, they were happy upon seeing drop of water in such dams.

"The government has carried out practical works for the improvement of people's life condition in the past 20 years, showing the government's continued efforts towards addressing people's problems," said Shamshad and Zarina, two residents of Kabul's Shakardara.

They hoped the dam would be soon inaugurated. The people of Kabul's Shakardara waited for one and half decade to see water at the dam.

Afghanistan National Water Regulatory Authority has informed that water intake has begun at Shah



wa Arus dam in Kabul's Shakardara district. The dam is considered as one of the biggest projects for management of water in the country.

A spokesperson to National Water Management Regulatory Authority Nizam Khapalwak told media that construction work on the dam has been completed and the dam will be soon inaugurated.

"Today, water intake started at the dam costing $53 million funded by the country's budget and it will be inaugurated in coming days," Khapalwak said, adding that the dam has the capacity of storing 9 million cubic meters of water, irrigating nearly 3,000 hectares of agricultural land and generating 1.2 megawatts of power once it is operational.

Construction work on Shah wa Arus dam was started nine years ago and it was determined that it would be completed in three years, but it took seven years. The dam will somehow address shortage problem of drinking water and electricity in Kabul city.

This comes amid increasing problems of shortage of water facing the people in Kabul city as shortage of water has changed to one of the most serious challenges in the city. A number of Kabul residents have said that shortage of water is threatening the life of people.

In addition to shortage of water in Kabul city, lack of electricity is another challenge facing the people of the city.

It is worth mentioning that Nimroz's Kamal Khan dam has been recently inaugurated by President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani. The dam is expected to provide nine megawatts of power, and, in the first stage, it will store 52 million cubic meters of water, according to the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority. The dam is 16 meters high and it will irrigate agricultural lands while also preventing flooding in the province.

Shukria Kohistani

Afghan children, women real victims of ongoing war in Afghanistan

Officials for Afghanistan state ministry of peace affairs say the government is committed to protection of the rights and future of children and respecting all Islamic and ethical principles in war to protect them as the children and women are the real victims of ongoing war in the country.

State minister of peace affairs Sayed Sadat Mansoor Naderi by pointing that Afghan children were suffering from ongoing war and violence in the country said civilians particularly children and women were the real victims of the continued war in Afghanistan and have sustained heavy casualties in the past four decades.

"State ministry for peace and reconciliation in consideration to current circumstances and needs has been able to hold a national think tank with participation of civil society and human rights activists to discuss vulnerability of children facing in ongoing war and violence," Naderi said.

He said that continued war and violence has harmed not only the current generation but also the future of Afghan children, stressing that children were, in fact, the biggest human investment of a society. He added that parties to the ongoing conflict would face the mental and physical health of this big human investment with the continued war and violence in the country.

According to state minister for peace and reconciliation, currently dozens of thousands of children are working as laborers due to economical problems and continued war in the country. Naderi further said that the biggest harm Afghan children were enduring was their recruitment and exploitation by terrorist groups in war.

"For the past few, nearly 20 million Afghan children have been concerning over their future, showing a human catastrophe; therefore, the country's state ministry for peace affairs is working to seek the attention of national and international organizations to further support and protect the rights of children," Naderi said, stressing that the only way to address the problem and prevent from the catastrophe is ceasefire and ending the continued war in the country.

He added that Taliban should show in action that they were abiding by the protection the life, rights and future of Afghan children.

Meanwhile, deputy of Afghanistan High Council for National Reconciliation Zuhra Mathar Ahmadzai said that continued war and disorders in the country has seriously harmed the people particularly the country's children.

"Afghanistan is an Islamic country and Islam has further valued the children. The Afghan children have seriously suffered from the continued violence in the country; therefore, they have turned to hard works to make a living, using drugs and other illegal acts," Mrs. Ahmadzai said, asking the government and people to further work to protect the rights and future of Afghan children.

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission by expressing concern over life condition of Afghan children says it is the responsibility of the government and children support organizations to provide all necessary opportunities for Afghan children in the country.

"The only way of solution to prevent from harming the Afghan children is the permanent ceasefire," said Benafsha Yaqoobi, a commissioner of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

This comes amid reports saying that Taliban are exploiting the Afghan children in war.

Previously, Afghanistan Ministry of Interior had said that terrorist groups exploiting the Afghan children in battlefields. The ministry has launched various campaigns to prevent from recruitment of children in terrorist groups in the country.

In its recent report on vulnerability of children in the world, the United Nations has said more than 8,500 children have been recruited as child soldier in wars in various parts of the world where nearly 2,700 child soldiers have been killed in war during the past one year.

Suraya Raiszada

World Bank helps improve higher education in Afghanistan and Bangladesh

KABUL: The World Bank's Board of Executive Directors yesterday approved a $191 million credit to Bangladesh and $18 million grant to Afghanistan to help the countries strengthen the higher education sector and respond better to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Higher Education Acceleration Transformation Project—the first World Bank-supported regional education project in South Asia—will support regional collaboration in the higher education sector, including student mobility through equivalence programs, credit transfer schemes, and university twinning arrangements within the region. It will also help more women access quality higher education, which will result in increased female labor force participation.

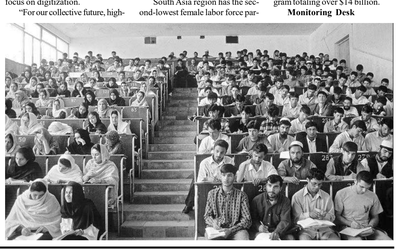
The COVID-19 pandemic has hit hard the higher education sector in South Asia, causing more dropouts and fewer enrolments. Female students are likely to be disproportionately impacted, further exacerbating the existing gender gap in higher education. The project will support pandemic and emergency response and build systemic resilience in the higher education sector with a specific focus on digitization.

"For our collective future, higher education is a necessity, not a choice. As Bangladesh aspires to achieve an upper middle-income status, the country needs to invest in its youth to create a skilled and globally competitive workforce," said Mercy Tembon, World Bank Country Director for Bangladesh and Bhutan. "This financing will help Bangladesh strengthen quality and relevance of tertiary education as well as ensure business continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic."

It will establish a South Asian Higher Education Portal, hosted in Bangladesh, to facilitate the 'virtual mobility' of students, by allowing students from the registered universities to take courses for credit outside their home country. In addition to Bangladesh and Afghanistan, students from other South Asian countries will be able to access the portal. It will also strengthen regional cooperation among the National Research and Education networks (NRENs) and provide expanded access and connectivity for students. The project will upgrade the Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN) and will offer a subsidized connectivity package to students and the participating universities in BdREN.

South Asia region has the second-lowest female labor force participation rate globally. To enable more women to access quality higher education, get better jobs, and become leaders, the project will build a network of women's universities and institutions, which will be initially anchored on the Asian University of Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

In Afghanistan, the higher education sector is growing rapidly. However, only 30 percent of the students at the tertiary level are women. "The regional project will prepare the students, particularly the female students for working in leadership and decision-making positions," said Henry Kerali, World Bank Country Director for Afghanistan. "The project will help meet the increasing demand for quality higher education in South Asia. Further, it will also help South Asian countries benefit from regional cooperation in higher education and strengthen research and innovations capacities in the universities," said Mokhlesur Rahman, World Bank Task Team Leader of the project.

The credit is from the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA), and has a 30-year term, including a five-year grace period. Bangladesh currently has the largest ongoing IDA program totaling over $14 billion.

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