SCO plays important role in peace, fighting terrorism in Afghanistan, experts

KABUL: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) foreign ministers' meeting was held in Tajikistan few days ago, following the Taliban militant, ISIS and other extremist networks still threatening the security of Afghanistan, the region and the world.

The SCO Foreign Ministers' meeting was held at a time when the threats of terrorism, lack of cooperation between the regional countries and the unproductive world countries' efforts to fight extremist groups are still among the challenges needing to be addressed.

Meanwhile, for its influence in the region, the SCO and some of its members have more influence in the country than some of the major world powers, can impose necessary pressures on terrorist groups and their supporters and be effective in Afghanistan's economic development.

Some political analysts said the SCO summit could be effective for the success of the Afghan peace process and the destruction of terrorist groups, especially the ISIS.

Afghan government officials say terrorism and extremism are among the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan in the region, and that the regional countries need to work together with Afghanistan to combat the vicious phenomenon.

"Regional cooperation is crucial to the success of the Afghan peace process, because ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan will create a secure atmosphere in the region and in the world," said Mohammad Hanif Atmar, the country's Minister of Foreign.

The government of Afghanistan has also said that terrorist groups, especially ISIS, are a global threat and the fight against these groups requires joint regional and global cooperation.

"No doubt that Afghanistan has suffered much from terrorist groups and there are still threats from them, so the SCO member states, which itself is concerned about the existence of the terrorists networks, especially ISIS, can play key role in fighting them regionally," said Amir Mohammad, a political analyst.

According to the expert, the SCO has an effective role in Afghanistan, peace, war, economic development and trade, and in case the majority of Afghanistan's neighboring countries are members of this organization, they will be very effective in various fields, especially peace.

Javid Kohistani, another expert, believes that if the regional countries want to prevent the spread of terrorist groups in their soils, they have to stop their interventions and contacts with other local terrorist groups posing serious threat not only to the security and stability of Afghanistan but also to the region and the world.

Kohistani considered the good relations of the Afghan government with some member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an opportunity that the government should use in order to gain the general support of the SCO in Afghanistan.

Fighting terrorist groups, especially the ISIS in Afghanistan, is a good starting point under this difficult time, regional experts believed.

However, the government of Afghanistan made great efforts to restore peace and is trying to form a regional consensus on peace in Afghanistan, and the leaders of the government believe that a regional consensus has now been established on the connection to peace in Afghanistan.

So far, regional countries and the world are trying to play a role in the Afghan peace process, but undeniably, only intra-Afghan talks can be the key to peace in the war-suffered nation.

The situation in Afghanistan is not the same as it was in the 1990s, because the Afghan security forces are now fully capable of providing security and fighting any terrorist group, and defend their homeland with strong morale besides having the international community support.

Suraya Raiszada

Women's groups call for UN peacekeeping force in Afghanistan

KABUL: Women's rights supporters and faith leaders are calling for a United Nations peacekeeping force for Afghanistan to protect hard-won gains for women over the last two decades as American and NATO forces complete their pullout from the war-torn country and a Taliban offensive gains control over more territory.

Under the Taliban, women were not allowed to go to school, work outside the home or leave their house without a male escort. And though they still face many challenges in the country's male-dominated society, Afghan women have increasingly stepped into powerful positions in numerous fields - and many fear the departure of international troops and a Taliban takeover could take away their gains.

In a May 14 letter obtained by The Associated Press, 140 civil society and faith leaders from the U.S., Afghanistan and other countries "dedicated to the education and rights of women in Afghanistan" asked U.S. President Joe Biden to call for a U.N. peacekeeping force "to ensure that the cost of U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan is not paid for in the lives of schoolgirls."

The letter also asked the U.S. to increase humanitarian and development aid to Afghanistan "as an important security strategy" to strengthen women and girls and religious minorities like the Hazaras. Three bombings at a high school in a Hazara neighborhood in Kabul on May 8 killed nearly 100 people, all of them Hazara and most of them young girls just leaving class.

The signatories blamed the Trump administration for failing to honor a U.N. Security Council resolution adopted in 2000 demanding equal participation for women in activities promoting global peace "by refusing to insist that women were part of the peace talks" with the Taliban.

Sakena Yacoobi, founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning which runs schools across 16 provinces, is quoted in the letter as saying: "For 20 years the West told the women of Afghanistan they are free. Free to learn, to grow, to be a human being independent of men's expectations of who they are."

"What the Taliban did in the 1990s was bad enough," she said. "What will they do now, with a

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Chat rooms in a conflict zone: Afghans confront Taliban on audio app

KABUL: As war rages across the countryside, young Afghans are plugging in their earphones and logging into audio-based app Clubhouse to argue with the Taliban and pitch counter-offensive tactics.

Launched in the United States at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the platform acts as a giant conference call and first found popularity among American tech entrepreneurs as a forum for discussing start-ups and cryptocurrencies.

In a conflict zone, it can have the rare power of connecting ordinary citizens with militants waging fear and destruction.

"Some say the Taliban have changed, but I wanted to hear from them, in their own voice, if they really have," 22-year-old Sodaba of Kabul told AFP.

With the withdrawal of foreign and NATO forces all but complete, the Taliban have waged a broad offensive, snapping up territory and stirring fears of a military takeover.

Sodaba was particularly concerned about whether the Islamic fundamentalist group still held "their strict beliefs, especially on women".

"This is an interesting outlet that lets ordinary Afghans talk directly with the Taliban and government in real time," said Kabul-based political activist and author Fahim Kohdamani, who hosts political debates on the platform on a regular basis.

"People are very worried about what comes next now that international troops are leaving Afghanistan."

Afghans in the country's urban centers have enjoyed a relative increase in social freedoms since the Taliban fell, but these gains are under threat as the militants advance on several provincial capitals.

For women, the concerns are magnified - the Taliban imposed a harsh version of Islamic law during their rule in the 1990s, which saw half the population confined to their homes.

"I saw that they wouldn't allow people they deemed opponents to talk, and even ridiculed one woman who asked about women's rights," Sodaba said.

Heated debates

Clubhouse allows users to dip into "rooms", either to listen or virtually put their hand up to speak in discussions, which, according to the platform's guidelines, cannot be recorded. Comments cannot be quoted either.

Some recent topics include the Taliban's view of the afterlife, how to have a happy relationship, and Persian poetry.

Many have wanted to weigh in on the reasons behind the quick fall of rural districts to the militants, with dozens waiting for their turn to speak.

"One of the good things about Clubhouse is that even people not so educated can come to hear or have their voices heard," said Kohdamani.

In a country overshadowed by an insurgency, discussions about politics and the Taliban attract the most listeners.

In a Taliban-run chatroom, the militants laud their humanitarian values, assuring Afghans they want unity.

With sometimes up to 100 listeners, things heat up fast as the group's supporters and opponents argue about war, human rights and the role of women in society.

"The Taliban called me rude and cut my mic after I spoke the truth about them," Haanya Saheba Malik tweeted. "They want to put the women in chains and restrict their human rights."

She later told AFP that she wants to report the Taliban to Clubhouse. "They openly declared those of us calling for human rights infidels and deserving of death," she said.

Another chatroom critical of the group opened up soon after, inviting the Taliban to join a conversation they were not moderating.

One of the group's activists signed in and was quickly bombarded by criticism.

But some users are fearful of Taliban-moderated conversations, saying the militants are violating Clubhouse policies by recording conversations that can be used for future retribution.

Spreading their message

For the Taliban, who have adopted an increasingly professional approach to public relations and social media, virtual chat rooms are a new way to disseminate their message.

Nearly half of Afghanistan's 33 million residents have access to the Internet, with 13 million using social media, according to the government's Information Technology Ministry.

While Facebook is by far the most popular platform, Clubhouse appears to be growing fast.

"This is a good platform to talk to and find understanding with those who oppose us," Taleban spokesman Mujahid told AFP.

The Taliban have rarely engaged in open discussion in the past.

"They have, however, been quick to get on Clubhouse to connect with people they usually avoid, perhaps because they see themselves on the verge of a military victory," said Abdul Mujeeb Khelwatgar, the head of media advocacy group NAI. But with little success so far, he added that "they may soon see Clubhouse as another outlet that needs to be avoided and banned". **Monitoring Desk**

Afghan top singer opens Afghan-made fashion boot

Aryana Sayeed, one of the country's top and famous artists, has opened Afghan-made fashion trade center in Kabul, the capital. Mrs. Sayeed says investment on Afghan women has been her long dream that has come true now.

In opening ceremony of the fashion center held with a number of Afghan women entrepreneurs, artists and journalists in Kabul, the country's top singer said opening of this fashion trade center was aimed at self-sufficiency of Afghan women who have had big achievements in the past 20 years and do not want their achievements to be ignored in peace talks with the Taliban group.

This comes amid increasing wave of concern over future of Afghanistan and insecurities in the country. Aryana Sayeed, the country's top Afghan star encouraged Afghan women to make further efforts towards self-sufficiency in the country.

"My dream was to have some investment in Afghanistan. My message to Afghan women is that they should struggle, be self-sufficient, study and work and should not lose themselves," Mrs. Sayeed said, hoping that Afghanistan will reach bright future.

She said that she spent 8 million AFG (about $100,000) to create a factory to produce her clothing products in Kabul city. The clothing features modern designs sewn by Afghan women. The store officially opened after a fashion show with models walking a red carpet. Aryana Sayeed and her production people have been working for almost a year to bring their clothes to the market.

Meanwhile, a number of Afghan women entrepreneurs who participated in the opening ceremony of the fashion center asked all sides to ongoing conflict to stop war and pave the way for Afghan women to investment and work in the country.

"During the past 20 years, Afghan women have been able to almost reach self-sufficiency in domestic and home-made products particularly handicrafts. Some even invested and opened some businesses in the country," said Nargis, an Afghan entrepreneur.

She said that the Afghan-made products had good markets not only inside the country but also beyond Afghanistan borders and world countries. According to Nargis, in current circumstances in which Afghans are kept in dark in connection with the country's future I hope Taliban should not stop Afghan women working outside.

"We're a new generation and want to live in peace in our country. Afghan women want to get education and work. As a woman, entrepreneur and investor, I don't know what will happen in future. Nobody can guarantee the future," Nargis said.

Following surge in Taliban attacks and violence across the country as well as falling dozens of districts to the hand of the group, concerns over future of the country have increased among the people particularly the Afghan women. A number of Afghan women by welcoming the opening the fashion center in Kabul city praised Aryana Sayeed's for the step towards investment and working for Afghan women in the country, saying that Afghan women should invest inside the country and should not lose their morale.

It is worth mentioning that Aryana is a singer, songwriter, and TV personality from Afghanistan. Born in 1985 in Kabul to a Pashto-speaking father and a Dari-speaking mother, Aryana left her country when she was eight years old. **Shukria Kohistani**