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Editorial

Int'l community's seriousness a must to stop Taliban atrocity

Different countries and international organizations, including foreign diplomatic missions in Kabul, EU, NATO, UN and OIC strongly condemned the attacks on civilians and expressed their deep concerns over the escalation of violence by the Taliban and the group's atrocities, mass assassinations and war crimes.

They have called for an immediate ceasefire and reiterated their commitments to supporting an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led inclusive peace and reconciliation process towards reaching a political solution. They have also said that investigating Taliban war crimes and would take future steps in line with the group's actions.

Despite regional efforts for sanctifications of the Taliban, the group continued horrible deeds and crimes forcing thousands of Afghan people to leave their hometowns and localities. Meanwhile, some of the opportunistic neighboring countries have begun to expurgate the deeds and actions of the Taliban, but the militant group refuting their justifications with their own dreadful deeds and action such as teasing girls, women, destroying and looting public and private properties, and crazily beheading armed and civilians in areas under their domination.

Indeed, the atrocity of the Taliban has not only re-revealed the real face of the group and that they are more dangerous than the 1990s, but also scandalize the opportunistic position of their old and new supporters. In general, the fear and frights have unspeakably enveloped the country forcing millions of people to flee or fly from their birthplaces.

Contrary to their leaders' remarks, the ideology of the Taliban have never changed. The recen violence and behavior of the Taliban showed that they are neither committed to the interests of Afghanistan and nor loyal to the Islamic teachings. According to Islam if someone kills a person as if he kills the whole of humanity, but killing of the innocent men and women are the easiest task for the militant group.

Without paying attention to advice of religious scholars, they audaciously shot when they face any active or educated individual. Until now, the Taliban killed hundreds of youths, sportsmen, social activists, traders, drivers, shopkeepers, or any active and educated individual. According to the latest official report from the provinces, Taliban have audaciously killed dozens of civilians and destroyed dozens of public properties, including bridges, buildings, schools and even dams.

Taliban have no capacity and no motives to serve people and so the public and administrative services are entirely stopped in the area under the control of the group. Similarly, there are no developmental projects and the people have entirely evacuated the occupied area. Instead of providing public services, the Taliban destroys public facilities.

Therefore, the regional countries must be warned as the Taliban breached all their commitments to their own land and people, they will not stay respectful to their neighbors and regional supporters too.

The group still has ties with Al-Qaeda and other militants and sparing no efforts to return Afghanistan into dark eras of 1990s and undermine all the achievements made so far. To curb the group's advances and protect the rights of Afghan people, the international community should do more for peace in the war-torn country. Condemnations alone cannot help and tangible steps are needed to control the situation and fill the gap after foreign forces withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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Afghanistan reconstruction oversight continues despite U.S. withdrawal

As the United States completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the work of the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction is not over.

"As long as there's money flowing, there's a need for oversight and SIGAR's responsibility," IG John Sopko told Government Executive on Thursday.

From fiscal 2002 to June 30, the United States appropriated or made available about $144 billion for reconstruction in Afghanistan. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan was established in the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal 2008 to audit and investigate spending on reconstruction projects in the country. This has been a challenge for the office in some cases due to the increasing classification of materials.

Sopko has been the special IG since July 2012, after being appointed by then-President Obama. The first Afghanistan reconstruction IG resigned in early 2011 after much criticism from the Senate and then there were two acting watchdogs before Sopko.

"The withdrawal of U.S. and coalition military forces and reductions in other U.S. personnel in Afghanistan complicate the critical task of overseeing U.S. funds still intended for reconstruction programs in that country," said the quarterly report released from the office on July 30. "Some $6.7 billion is currently appropriated and awaiting disbursement, with additional billions expected to follow." As Sopko wrote in a letter to Congress on June 1, it "will be much more difficult" to investigate waste, fraud and abuse after the withdrawal, but it still can be done.

Going forward, SIGAR will expand its use of "ancillary information sources," as well as continue its use of geospatial imaging and GPS technology. SIGAR "is prepared to co-locate a small staff with any 'over the horizon' security-assistance office for Afghanistan that the Department of Defense may establish after the military withdrawal from the country is complete," said the report. Also, "SIGAR investigators will expand their work with U.S.-based Afghans and international law-enforcement officials to fight activities like corruption, narcotics production and trafficking, and money laundering."

Government Executive interviewed Sopko via Zoom on Thursday morning about the future of the office and the most recent quarterly report. The interview has been excerpted by The Kabul Times which is as follow:

As the United States completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of 9/11, how, if at all, will your mission change? Do you have a sunset date?

Our sunset provision is in our statute that created us and we go out of business not when the number of troops leave, but it's when the amount of authorized and appropriated funds for reconstruction fall below $250 million. We get six months to basically get our house in order and then we go out of business. To put it in context right now, there's approximately $6.5 billion of authorized and appropriated, but not yet spent money in the pipeline. Plus, the [Biden] administration has asked for an additional $3.3 billion for supporting the Afghan military and another $300 million to $400 million for civilian reconstruction. So technically there's a lot of money to keep us going and as long as there's money flowing, there's a need for oversight and SIGAR's responsibility.

The office has been uncovering waste, fraud and mismanagement of U.S. resources in Afghanistan for 13 years, and you've been the IG for nine of them. I'm wondering how you reflect on your role, particularly as U.S. operations there come to a close?

This is what I was told by the White House when I was appointed by the Obama administration was basically, after they approved me, it was basically "fix it and fix it fast." And what they meant by that was, we had spent so much money in Afghanistan already on reconstruction. We weren't created until 10 years into the process and there was a lot of waste, fraud and abuse or just mass confusion as to how the money was being spent. So, they wanted us to do something about it. Congress was demanding something. The administration itself was "we had to fix the problem."

That hasn't changed a lot other than the amount of money over there has decreased, but you can see even the problems going on now with the Afghan military. This is something which we focus on; we're not tied to the number of U.S. troops, but we're tied to the "train, advise and assist" mission for the Afghan military, which is really important. The bulk of the money we spent on reconstruction, which we are responsible for, covers how well a job we are doing and training, advising and assisting the military, that will continue. So that role really hasn't changed too much.

I think, if anything, I've come to realize, at the suggestion of a number of former diplomats and generals, that we really have a responsibility as SIGAR to try to make sense of all the money and all we've done over there...I think we've been effective because we've looked at a broader picture. We spent more money in Afghanistan on reconstruction than we did to rebuild all of Europe after World War II. The reconstruction portion, not the warfighting, reconstruction portion itself is the largest assistance program we have ever done in our history. And it was a different approach than most development expenditures. It was a whole-of-government and whole-of-governments [approach]. So, it wasn't just USAID or State, it was USAID, State, DoD, Department of Labor, [Federal Aviation Administration], Homeland Security, you name it. We have multiple agencies, plus we had multiple foreign agencies and international agencies. I think Congress had wisdom when they've created us to not limit us to just one agency like most of the IGs you're talking to.So, to answer your question... it's understanding this is a unique approach with unique authorities and that's why we started creating—and I think we're the only IG that does it—we have a whole unit developing lessons learned from the whole-of-government approach and we've issued 10 [reports so far].

I think there is a congressional interest in us at least for a little while continuing some of these lessons learned reports, particularly on trying to understand the whole what happened over there, and what we can learn to do it better the next time because we will do it another time. In your most recent quarterly report that came out last week, you spoke about how some of your intelligence gathering and oversight operations will change as the United States withdraws. Can you summarize those?

We are the only U.S. government oversight mission, still operating with people on the ground in Afghanistan, [but that has reduced]. But we know how to operate in a dangerous environment...and that will continue. It will be more difficult. But most of our work is your traditional following the contracting language, working, looking at where the money goes and a lot of that can be done overseas, it doesn't have to be done on the ground. What's important about being present on the ground is the fact that most of our people have spent multiple years in Afghanistan. They know the good people they know, they have contacts...But we can do a lot [otherwise], particularly if we get access to the computer systems that the Afghan government run, which would help us understand how that money's been spent. And that was one of the suggestions we made to Congress that they condition additional assistance on making certain that we have access to those books and records and those computer systems.

During an event with GW's Project for Media and National Security last week you said the following: "What you see in Afghanistan is evidence of problems of our own government. We have a lousy HR system—human resources. We have a lousy procurement system in place. And we have a lousy way of hiring people, getting the best people for the job and firing the bad people. And we also have a lousy way of collecting lessons or observations from major actions like we did in Afghanistan." Can you elaborate on that?

I think the vast, vast, vast majority of the soldiers, the generals, the ambassadors, the Foreign Service, the aid officers who went over there as well as the contractors, were smart, were brave, and were the best we had. But the problem is, we gave them a box of broken tools. We gave them a procurement system in which you can't hire people and that's the procurement system we have here.

You talk to most of the other IGs, we can't hire the best people fast enough and we can't get rid of the bad ones fast enough. That was brought over there. We have a procurement system, particularly the Department of Defense procurement system, which has been on [the Government Accountability Office's] high-risk list [almost] since I came to Washington in 1982. Can you believe that? Since [GAO started compiling the list in 1990] the procurement system for the Department of Defense, which is the largest operator in Afghanistan has been on the high-risk list. We tend to reward people by how much money you put on contract, not whether it works or not. And that's the broken system, so we gave that to the people of Afghanistan. Going back to the HR system, there's a particular problem with the short tours of duty. And this is a common problem that doesn't happen just in Afghanistan, it's anywhere we work, where people will go over on the military, they're there for what six months?...We call it jokingly the "annual lobotomy" because 90% of the State Department and USAID employees [in the embassy] leave every year. So, what do you think happens? You've got to retrain somebody. That's why it's very important that SIGAR's people are there for five or six years. They know the players.

It's not that the people we sent were bad or evil or stupid. It's that we put them in a system with a box of broken tools and every one of those problems are supercharged when you're in an environment like Afghanistan, so that's the thing to keep in mind. So, what you see wrong in Afghanistan is probably what the [Veterans Affairs Department] IG complains about or the [Health and Human Services Department] IG or whomever...It's like on steroids when you're in a war zone.

What, if anything, did you learn from the special IG for Iraq reconstruction?

I remember talking to Stuart Bowman, [special IG for Iraq reconstruction], a number of times when I got started...I think the one thing that surprised him that equally surprised me was how much it was just incompetency in waste and not outright fraud. Now, there was a lot of fraud, there's a lot of fraud in Afghanistan, you're going to see it growing now as the crisis develops. But he commented on that, and I realized that soon that...it wasn't as much stealing as it was stupidity. I hate to use that term, but let some really stupid contracts [go through.]

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

One thing...because it's the big news now is about the use of whistleblowers and the protection of whistleblowers....I think it's really important, frankly in light of what you're reading about some former IG and I don't know anything about the allegation, but it is key to the success of SIGAR, and I think to the success of any IG that you find the whistleblowers, you as an IG protect the whistleblowers. They're our bread and butter. They're what half of our cases are made on. It's whistleblowers who go through a real risky position to come to the federal government and particularly to come to an IG, because the IG is usually their last resort. We're the ones who are there to protect them. And if we don't protect them, who will?

They have a tough, tough life already. Being a whistleblower in Washington, D.C., really means you're taking not only your future employment, but it's sometimes your life, in your own hands by doing the right thing. So it is a key that's why we are very, very defensive of anybody who tries to get the names of our whistleblowers. We have a major lawsuit now. The Washington Post wants to get the names of the people we interview for those lessons learned reports and we were happy to give them the names of people who didn't mind, but [not] those who wanted to be protected, and particularly those who are asking us because if their names came out their lives would be on the line. And so that's why it's really important that I think it's very important that we as IGs reconfirm with the American people and to those contractors and those federal employees, that a good IG will be there to protect you. And we will do everything in our power to protect you because that's how we can improve the government.

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