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Afghanistan and the Socio-Economic-Political Stability in Asia

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Peace has again eluded Afghanistan with the imposition of sanctions by the United Nations and suspension of the latest talks, aimed at ending two decades of war, continuing instability, and socio-economic and political crisis. Ignoring last-minute pleas by the ruling Taliban militia for a temporary postponement of the imposition of sanctions, the United Nations went ahead on November 14, 1999 and slapped punitive sanctions on Afghanistan demanding the arrest and turning over of the suspected Islamic terrorist Osama bin Laden for trial on charges of having plotted the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Africa.

Under the terms of the sanctions imposed by the world body, all overseas assets of the Taliban would be frozen and a blanket ban would be imposed on flights owned, operated or leased by the Ariana Afghan Airlines. Humanitarian assistance and flights for the pilgrimage to Mecca would however be exempted. In addition to demanding Laden's hand-over, UN resolution 1267 also took the Taliban Islamist militia to task for abuse of human rights, maltreatment of women, use (by force) of child soldiers, opium production and last year's assault on the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sherif. The US initiated resolution was passed unanimously by all the 15 UN Security Council members. However, Malaysia and Bahrain expressed concern about the effects of the sanctions on ordinary Afghans. China also expressed its own reservations.

At least 225 people were killed and more than 4,000 wounded in the nearly simultaneous bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya on August 7, 1998. Shortly after the embassy attacks, the United States launched missile strikes against bases in Afghanistan alleged to have been used by Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda group. The US already has imposed its own sanctions against the Islamist Taliban, including freezing the assets of Afghanistan's national Ariana Airlines and banning US investments and trade with the area under Taliban control. The US State department has also offered rewards of 5 million each for information leading to the arrest or conviction of the culprits.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation chief said Bin Laden also faced charges in New York following alleged attempts to procure chemical and biological agents for "terrorists activities". He mentioned that Bin Laden had alleged connection with Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, and Islamist guerilla convicted of the 1993 US World Trade Centre bombing, who was suspected of planning to blow up 11 US civilian airliners from his Manila base in 1994. Such terrorist networks with their base in Afghanistan have put the security of many countries in the vicinity in jeopardy... In the Post-Kargil operations, India was seriously concerned about the involvement of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Russia has also witnessed the Chechnya trouble spilling over to the streets of Moscow. The ardent Islamic sympathisers of the Taliban have advocated the cause of Islamic militants like Osama bin Laden on the face of

increasing American resolve to nab him. Osama has become so popular in the meanwhile, that in South and West Asia many children are even named after him. But for those who have lost their kith and kin and property to terrorism, his name conjures up pain and agony. Very troubling to Washington and others is the fact that Osama has been lending his “services” – providing arms training and monetary assistance – to terrorists and militant groups spread all over the world plotting against the U.S.

Afghanistan’s ruling Islamist Taliban militia recently warned the United States to end “hostility” towards it or face natural calamities such as earthquakes and storms. The warning was in a message by the Islamist militia’s supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, issued from Taliban headquarters at the southern Afghan town of Kandahar. He addressed the American people urging them to pressurize their government to “cease hostility” against the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate, otherwise the United States would suffer earthquakes and storms. The Taliban Chief rejected a UN demand to hand over Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden currently believed to be hiding in Afghanistan and instead proposed that a group of Islamic scholars advise them on a “solution”.

“Osama issue is an Islamic issue and the only way to resolve it is through a unanimous decision by Ulema (Islamic theologians) of three Islamic countries, including Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and another third Islamic country (Pakistan)”, a spokesman for the office of Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar told the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic press. He further said, “if the United States wants to impose sanctions upon us it must be known that God is on the side of the just and no one can challenge God.” Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, the new Talibanese foreign minister is not hesitating to involve the 55-member Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in the Osama affair by proclaiming the Taliban logic that “the Almighty is definitely on our side.”

Mullah Omar also offered to hold talks with “anybody” to check terrorism. He said in another statement that Afghanistan had never been a refuge for terrorists. “Neither are we terrorists, nor (do) support terrorists”, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) quoted the statement saying. “It is far from justice that now a days in the world no distinction is being made between Mujahideen (Islamic holy warriors) and terrorists”. Omar further said the whole world was happy when the Mujahideen from the rest of the world came to Afghanistan to fight so called Soviet Occupation in the 1980s. Omar, a close friend of Osama reportedly said later that he would rather see the destruction of the half of Afghanistan that survived the Soviet invasion than hand over a “fellow Muslim in need” to the west.

“Most of these Mujahideen returned to their countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, only to face difficulties and torture there, and some stayed back in Afghanistan,” he said. However, Libyan president Gadhafi in a recent interview alleged that the suspected international terrorist leader Osama bin Laden is a renegade former employee of the US Central Intelligence Agency. “Osama bin Laden is one of those naïve Moslems who were duped by the United States and were used to fight the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan”, Gadhafi told the *Al-Hayat daily*. Such people, who were “a fabrication of the American intelligence services, later turned against the United States and began attacking its interests, he said. Gadhafi further added that armed Libyan Islamic radicals (he equated the fundamentalists to prostitutes) who returned to the country at the beginning of the 1990s from Afghanistan formed a “small group, which has been totally

liquidated”. “Some of them repented and helped the authorities to discover the hiding places of the others. This group was swiftly dismantled”, he said.

Violent anti-American protests rocked Kabul as United Nations sanctions against the Taliban-banning flights and seizing Taliban assets worldwide –went into effect in mid-November. Columns of Young men carrying the white flag of the Taliban marched through Kabul and Karachi chanting slogans against the US and the UN, which the Taliban militia claims is a “puppet” of the US. In Kabul common people expressed anger and bewilderment at the sanctions. The Taliban militia in power has sought to play down the impact of the sanctions, but Kabul residents, already facing years of Islamic social terror and economic hardship, are deeply demoralised. ‘It is hard enough here’, said Amanullah Khan, a waiter in central Kabul. “The ordinary people will suffer due to Osama’s presence and it will make no difference to the ruling government”.

For far too long has India been a passive onlooker to the deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan much after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from that country. Fratricidal sectarian warfare based on tribal loyalties has its own logic and it was also largely limited to Afghanistan after the Soviet pull out. But it was the capture of Kabul three years ago by the Islamist Taliban conservative militia, backed to the hilt by the Pakistan Army and intelligence agency (ISI), which really threatened Asian stability while seeking to turn Afghanistan into a source of international terrorism. The reverberation of the fall of Kabul has been felt in the entire South-west Asian, Central Asian and Russian region, disturbing the regional peace stability and security. India has been concerned about the atrocities and human rights abuses of particularly women and children being committed in the name of Islam in the Taliban ruled parts of Afghanistan “with inspiration from outside source (Pakistan).”

India’s permanent representative at UN, Mr. Kamlesh Sharma, said in his recent statement at the UN Security Council that “the territories in Afghanistan which Taliban have occupied through military forces have become a breeding ground of international terrorism. International terrorists groups find a safe haven here and in the areas straddling Afghanistan’s southern borders. There are numerous training camps for terrorists and from these camps and bases, extremists and terrorists go out into the region beyond to carry out acts which are the very anti-thesis of all civilised life.”

India has been interacting closely with Iran, Turkey, Russia, Central Asian neighbours of Kabul and recently with the U.S. on the Afghan situation. The Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee while paying homage to those who had made the supreme sacrifice while fighting invaders in Kargil and cross-border insurgents in Jammu and Kashmir, expressed his serious concern about the situation in Afghanistan where terrorism and religious extremism had affected the socio-economic and security environment. Outside interference in Afghanistan must stop, he stressed and sounded his concern about the spread of international terrorism. India and Turkey have initiated a regular dialogue on Afghanistan too in the mean while. Turkey’s special envoy on Afghanistan, Mr. Aydemir Erman, was recently in New Delhi to hold intensive discussions with senior Indian officials on the recent developments there. Mr. Erman’s visit coincided with India’s conscious effort to highlight the negative regional and global implications of the fundamentalist entrenchment in Afghanistan. Both India and Turkey agreed that a political alternative to the present set up in Afghanistan is required. For this, a new government, which was broad-based and

reflected the ethnic mosaic of Afghanistan was required, they held. The United Nations, both sides agreed, needed to play a pivotal role in this exercise.

The Taliban and Bin Laden phenomena are the offshoot of the disastrous policies pursued by several countries in Afghanistan, particularly the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan during the past two decades. Officials in Washington, Riyadh and Islamabad visualised Moscow's retreat as the first crucial step in the reemergence of an Afghanistan ready to ally with the United States. The US-Saudi-Pakistani alliance had played the central role in training, arming and financing the Afghan Islamists to expel the Russians from Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia gave the Afghan Mujahideen several hundred Iraqi army tanks captured by the American and British forces in the Gulf War and turned over to the Saudis. The Saudis have supplied them to the rebels as part of their determined attempts to gain influence in Afghanistan. The captured Iraqi tanks were manned in the Gardez offensive by Afghan crew members who went to the Gulf as part of the coalition forces. The Pakistani intelligence offices played an important role in subverting the peace process in Afghanistan by threatening to cut the flow of arms to Mujahideen commanders who refused to follow Pakistan ISI guidelines when negotiating with US or former Soviet officials.

Religious (Islamic) passions were played upon by agents from all the Islamic nations involved in the war, notably by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Both these countries maintain thousands of religious personal in the country as agitators and agent provocateurs. Apart from their destructive activities, Muslim extremists are carrying out a silent war of subversion and infiltration in the former Soviet Republics of Tazikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The long-term aim is to arouse the religious and nationalist passions of the 30 million Muslims north of Afghanistan border. The work is inspired by and financed by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

With the Soviet withdrawal accomplished Washington put Afghanistan on the back burner. But the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 gave a fillip to the Northern alliance or Islamic coalition movement in Afghanistan, which acquired a momentum of its own. The coalition's seizure of power in Kabul in April 1991 following the fall of the secular leftist regime of Muhammad Najibullah, paved the way for the rise of the extremist Taliban Islamic movement two years later and its subsequent capture of Kabul. No wonder, Pakistan seized the opportunity offered by Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan to impose a regime on Kabul favourable to itself. The Taliban extremist government in Kabul depends on Pakistan and its other Islamic allies for funds, arms, equipments and logistical support. Pakistan's Military ruler Gen. Pervez Musharraf has not stopped Pakistanis from joining terrorist-camps in the Taliban-held Afghanistan, the opposition Burhanuddin Rabbani Government stated this recently.

Speaking on behalf of the Rabbani Government, its Ambassador to India. Mr. Masood Kahlili said that since the October 12 (1999) military coup, there had been absolutely no change in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. "The interference by way of helping the Taliban and allowing boys from the madrassas (religious schools) to join the training camps for terrorists run by the Taliban and Osama bin Laden is continuing", he said. "More than 2000 Pakistanis have been killed so far while fighting for the Taliban against the Northern Alliance led by Commander Ahmed Shah Masood", he said.

Saudi Arabia appears to have continued to fund much of Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan through both official and unofficial channels. Until mid 1998, Saudi Arabia supplied heavily subsidised fuel to the Taliban through Pakistan apart from providing other assistance. Saudi Arabia feels some affinity to the Taliban interpretation of Islam, and support for Taliban is consistent with its rivalry with Iran and long-term strategic cooperation with Pakistan. (Quoted in *Current History*, February 1999, p. 85) The Taliban are least concerned about the rights of the hapless people of Afghanistan.

The founders of US policy in Afghanistan during the Carter and Reagan administrations (1977 onwards) perhaps did not realize that in spawning Islamic militancy with the primary aim of defeating the Soviet Union they were sowing the seeds of a phenomenon that was likely to acquire a life of its own, spread through out Arab-Asian and African world and threaten US interests. The Afghanistan problem thus is a creation of US Cold War Politics. And, in considering any problem of strategic diplomacy, due consideration should given not only to one's self interest but also to its future implications. The Afghanistan problem is a source of concern to all in the region, China, Russia, Central Asia, India, Iran and Turkey. Therefore, an urgent understanding between them over Afghanistan is necessary. The present situation will have its impact on all the neighbours of Afghanistan. A fundamentalist regime in the area is not only harmful for its own people but it will have problems of adjustment with rest of the world. The Osama Bin Laden factor shows that fundamentalist terrorism has some base in Afghanistan. For its own end Pakistan has certain links and it is exploiting it to destabilise India. Internal ethnic tensions in Afghanistan will only increase if Taliban representing only one major ethnic grouping, Pushtoons, has a dominant sway in the affairs of the country. The groups represented in the previous government of President Rabbani, which consisted of ethnic elements like Uzbeks and Tajiks have been displaced. But they have links with their ethnic compatriots in the Central Asian countries. Unless there is a congenial stable responsible national government in Afghanistan caring for its own people, having normal diplomatic relations with the rest of the world it will continue to have unsettling effect on the South, South-West and Central Asian region.