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Why we cannot abandon Afghanistan

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THE recent spate of suicide bombings across Afghanistan remind us that the Taliban-al-Qaeda forces are alive and well, and are becoming increasingly active as the time for the Nato withdrawal nears. The suicide car bomb attacks on July 15 in a market place and a mosque in Paktika province claimed 89 lives, mostly women and children. The attacks are aimed at creating panic and despondency among the Afghans who had, despite Taliban threat, held the third presidential election on schedule.

There is an apprehension that amidst all the brutality that is going on across Middle East and also the looming danger of an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Afghanistan issue may well be forgotten, as happened after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. At that time, the Soviet withdrawal in the face of a CIA-funded and orchestrated Mujahedin onslaught was seen as a victory for the “Free World” and a defeat of the Evil Empire (Soviet Union). What turned out eventually was a far greater evil -- the rise of the Taliban and a sanctuary for the al-Qaeda.

Between 1990 till the ouster of Taliban forces in 2001, Afghanistan saw a period of utter destruction, first by the Mujahedin forces fighting among themselves (1990-95) and then the ISI-sponsored Taliban regime (1996-2001) imposing their own version of Islamic Sharia that effectively pushed the nation to the middle ages.

This period saw destruction of all physical and administrative infrastructures. Taliban closed down all schools and institutions of higher learning, banned female education, stopped women from working, imposed harsh physical punishment including publicly stoning women to death. Trade and commerce came to a standstill and the agriculture output dwindled. People suffered under a draconian rule not seen by the world for many centuries. However, since 2001, when the Taliban were driven out of Kabul, there has been a democratically elected government in Afghanistan that ushered in a steady all-round growth and development.

For the first time, Afghanistan had a written democratic constitution that ensured peaceful and orderly transfer of power, recognised ethnic diversity, and ensured the rights of women, children and the disadvantaged. The country had three presidential and two parliamentary elections that saw good turnout despite threats from Taliban forces of attacking and disrupting the polling process. The latest presidential poll has given rise to the allegation of vote rigging and result-tempering by the losing candidate, but these are not unexpected in a country that is just emerging from centuries of autocratic rules. In fact, until a decade ago, Afghanistan had not seen the exercise of democracy and rarely, if ever, had there been a peaceful transfer of power.

Economically, the country has come a long way showing steady growth over the decade. A country that had virtually no currency, is now hosting dozens of foreign banks with both the domestic consumption and international business rising. Shopping malls, high-

rise apartments and modern business districts now dot all large cities. Education has shown a dramatic comeback with thousands of schools repaired, new schools established, universities and medical and engineering colleges opening up in every province. More Afghan boys and girls are going to school than ever before.

There has been huge investment in rebuilding war damaged communication infrastructures. Roads and highways now connect all parts of the country. Modern health facilities are now expanding. Ariana Afghan Airlines is flying again, so are nearly a dozen private airlines in domestic and international routes. The country that had no police or security forces in 2001, has since then built up forces from scratch, and the responsibility of providing security to most of the country rests with the Afghan forces. They have shown their mettle in a number of encounters with the Taliban and proved their worth. On May 23, Afghan forces thwarted a coordinated attack by the Taliban on the Indian consulate in Herat, killing all the attackers. While the Taliban have been able to launch suicide attacks, they have failed to penetrate the defensive barrier put up by the Afghan forces.

Whereas women could not come out of their residences under the Taliban rule, they are now joining the police and army. Afghan women pilots are flying combat missions, an opportunity still denied to women in many Muslim countries. The empowerment of women in Afghanistan has been most dramatic since the fall of the Taliban -- they are increasingly visible in public life and influence the decision making process at all levels. In the field of sports, Afghanistan has already made its mark. A country that was not allowed to play football during Taliban era is now the Saarc champion. In cricket, with a history of only five years, they have beaten countries like Bangladesh and Kenya and are now set to play in the World Cup 2015. Their women cricket team is rapidly catching up too, something unthinkable in Taliban era. In every Olympic Games since 2001, Afghanistan won medals, including gold, something that other Saarc countries could not. Should a country that displays such dynamism be allowed to sink into medieval darkness just because the world does not care?

The Taliban-al-Qaeda remnants enjoyed a sanctuary in FATA region of Pakistan where they could organise, plan, arm, recuperate and regroup with impunity. Had the Pakistani establishment, especially the ISI, not nurtured the Taliban forces, and the Pakistani military had cooperated and coordinated with Afghan and Nato forces, the Taliban threat would have been eliminated years ago. Pakistan had been helping the Afghan Taliban all these years with the hope that these forces would eventually establish a client government in Kabul. After suffering devastating attacks for years, Pakistan has now come to realise that the Taliban that they created in mid-1990 to take control of Kabul is now poised to take control of Islamabad. However, the anti-Taliban operation that Pakistan is now waging in North Waziristan is unlikely to give decisive result because it is not coordinated with the Nato-Afghan forces in the west. It is feared that the key Taliban elements have crossed over to Afghanistan.

It is important that Pakistan, Afghanistan and other stake holders such as US, Iran, India and China recognise the Taliban-al-Qaeda as a threat to the peace and stability of the region and draw out a common strategy to combat the threat. We, in South Asia, are increasingly vulnerable to the rising extremism in Afghanistan and the Middle-East. If Afghanistan falls to the Taliban, the next will be Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state. That will have immediate repercussion in India, Iran, and China. It is, therefore, important that

the stake-holders get together to plan a long-term strategy on how to help Afghanistan tide over its security crisis and ensure its continued journey towards a peaceful, progressive, democratic order. Indeed, Bangladesh too has an important role to play in this process.

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