

Monthly Analysis

July 2020

Monthly Analytical Report on the Situation in Afghanistan



By: Hekmatullah Zaland

Preamble

In the month of July, the political situation was once again centered on the developments in the Afghan peace process. In this month, the first phase of the US-Taliban agreement was completed. During this time, regarding the implementation of the agreement from both sides, US forces withdrew from five military bases, the prisoners exchange process entered into its final stages and the pressure mounted for the intra-Afghan talks. On the other hand, in this month, there was an increased mistrust between Afghan government and the Taliban which resulted in increased volume of violence comparing to the past months. Besides all the above, in the last days of July, ceasefire was declared by the Taliban and the Afghan government for the sake of Eid-ul-Adha, which brought up the hope for the success of the peace process. Besides developments in the peace process, the delay in forming the government and incidents concerning Kabul's relations with Iran and Pakistan were seen. These and other issues are discussed in the following sections.



Political Situation

The government formation

After almost two and half months of the political settlement between President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Cabinet members have not been introduced apart from a small number. On June the 20th, the National Assembly requested the government to introduce the candidate ministers for obtaining vote of confidence. The National Assembly has criticized President Ghani for violating his promise he made on the day of inaugurating the Parliament that he would introduce the candidate ministers for obtaining the vote of confidence within two weeks; since then, four and half months have passed by. According to the members of National Assembly, they would not break for summer holidays until the ministers are not introduced. According to certain resources, the disagreement upon the introduced ministers by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah has been the reason for the delay in forming the cabinet. Seddiq Seddiqi, the spokesperson for the President, without mentioning names of specific candidate ministers said that the presidency is insisting on having eligible persons introduced by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah for the concerned ministries.

It seems that the delay would be further prolonged due to the disagreement between President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah regarding 50-50 power sharing. This might pave the way for further disagreements between President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah as it was the case in the National Unity Government era. Such disagreements were the main issue regarding the internal differences in the National Unity Government, which was not addressed till the end of that period and some ministries were administered by the acting ministers during the full term of the government.



Kabul-Tehran Relations

Since last month, the relations between Iran and Afghanistan have witnessed fresh incidents. Following the deliberate drowning of Afghan refugees by Iranian forces and the vehicle of Afghan refugees being shot by the Iranian forces, both of which resulted in casualties of tens of Afghans, protests took place in Afghanistan against Iran and the protests led to the gate of Iran Embassy being colored red. In reaction to the protests, Iran summoned Afghan Ambassador and mentioned that peaceful protests is the right of Afghans, but irregularities would not be tolerated by them.

In the first incident, Iranian border protection forces pushed 46 Afghan refugees in to the Harirod River, from which 17 were rescued, 12 dead bodies found, and 17 bodies have not been recovered yet. In the second incident, 3 Afghan refugees died in the shooting of a vehicle by Iranian forces. In a released video of this incident, an Afghan refugee asks for water and shouts "I am burned". This video sparked wide reactions.

The above situation made Afghanistan's Foreign Minister to visit Iran and discuss with Iranian authorities to avoid repeating such incidents. The Afghan peace process and the status of Afghan refugees in Iran were also discussed between Mr. Atmar and Iranian authorities. During these meetings, Iranian side expressed readiness to host the intra-Afghan talks.

Following the trip of Mr. Haneef Atmar, Iran's political deputy minister Mr. Abaas Iraqchi traveled to Kabul on 15th July and met with Afghanistan's foreign Minister and other authorities. While speaking in a gathering in Kabul, Iran's deputy foreign minister told that Afghan government shall praise those who have fought under the Fatemiyoun (Fatimid) group against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Fatemiyoun is the group which has been formed by Iran from Shite citizens of Afghanistan and which is fighting to support Bashar-ul-Asad. The Fatemiyoun group has frequently sparked controversial debates in Afghanistan. Mr. Iraqchi also briefed about the strategic cooperation document



between Iran and Afghanistan, which is due to be concluded within coming few months and signed by the presidents of both countries. It is said that according to the documents, refugee cards would be distributed to all the Afghan refugees in Iran. Talks on this document happened five years ago and five committees have been determined to conclude the document.

These visits by Afghan and Iranian authorities caused the relations between the two countries to normalize, and it is expected that Iran would take certain measures such as distributing refugee cards to Afghan refugees to improve its relations with Afghanistan. It is also expected that Iran would be further involved in the Afghan peace process. US special representative for Afghan peace Mr. Zalmi Khalilzad speaking at the United States Institute of Peace USIP on 24th July mentioned that Iran is currently not cooperating in the peace process but if Iran intends, US can talk with Iran on this issue. According to Khalilzad, establishing peace in Afghanistan is a goal for US and they are ready to talk with Iran to achieve this goal.

Pakistan's Military Attacks on Eastern Afghanistan

Pakistan military's missile attack on eastern parts of Afghanistan has continued since recent years; but Pakistan has not expressed reaction over these attacks. From time to time, these attacks have caused financial losses and human casualties in that region.

In the month of July, the attacks intensified once again and sparked reactions in Afghanistan. Independent Human Rights Commission in Afghanistan in a reaction to these attacks, told in a statement that as a result of the attacks on Sarkano district and Asadabad on 15th July, seven civilians were killed and eight others were injured. The statement adds that from time to time, these attacks have caused civilian casualties. The Commission has expressed its concern over the attacks and has asked the government to take serious measures against the attacks.



Afghanistan's National Security Advisor Mr. Hamdullah Mohib while visiting the families of the victims of the Pakistan military attacks mentioned that the Pakistan military attacks will not be left unanswered.

Afghanistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs in Kabul and Afghan Embassy in Islamabad communicated with Pakistan Ambassador and officials from Pakistan's Foreign Ministry and conveyed their condemnation. According to a statement by ministry of foreign affairs, complaint has also been filed at the UN regarding these attacks.

Although apparently the reason behind these attacks is not clear, but Pakistan has put in place barb wire and establishments across the Durand Line, and analysts believe that on one hand the reason behind the attacks are political issues at the back of the scene and on the other hand is the Durand Line issue. According to these analysts, Pakistan is trying to maintain pressure on Afghan government by such attacks on parts near the Durand Line.

The Peace Process

The first 135 days of the US-Taliban Agreement

On 14th July, the first 135 days phase of the Doha agreement between the US and Taliban completed. In this regard, the US special representative for the Afghan peace and the holder of the signature on the agreement Mr. Zalmi Khalilzad tweeted that US has undertaken serious efforts in this first and important phase of implementing the agreement. According to him, US has withdrawn its forces from five military bases in Afghanistan; NATO forces have also reduced accordingly.

Mr. Khalilzad expressed satisfaction over the considerable developments in the process. The prisoners' exchange process has witnessed remarkable progress, negotiating teams of Taliban and Afghan government are formed, no US citizen has been killed in Taliban attacks, and regional communication has widened; but still a lot has to be done, he said.

On 14th July, Taliban carried out a group attack on the center of Samangan of province and tens of Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) officials were killed and injured in the attack. Zalmi Khalilzad in a tweet, condemned that attack and expressed concern over the increased violence. According to him, Taliban's attack in Samangan is against the commitments of Taliban to maintain low level of violence till an agreement is reached upon a comprehensive ceasefire in the intra-Afghan talks. According to him, such attacks would empower those who are trying against peace and insisted that all the parties shall reduce violence. As said by Zalmi Khalilzad, their behavior in the second phase of implementing the agreement would be conditions based. He has said that they are looking forward to the conclusion of prisoners' exchange, reduction in the violence and the commencement of intra-Afghan talks.

The Taliban spokesman said in a statement that the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and the evacuation of five military bases under the agreement was a good

development in the process, and that no attacks have been carried out on US forces indicates the Taliban's commitment to the agreement. But has expressed concern over the delay in the prisoners' release process, the impasse over the black list, attacks on civilian places, drone strikes and night raids. According to the Taliban spokesperson, the attack in Samangan was also a reaction to such attacks.

Taliban-Al-Qaida Relations

At the end of July, media reports were published concerning the relations among the Taliban and Al-Qaida. According to these reports, The UN Security Council has said that Al-Qaida has active but secret presence in 12 provinces of Afghanistan. This report mentions that the head of Al-Qaida group has come to Afghanistan months ago and has met with a high-ranking official of Haqani group. According to the report, this group currently has 400 to 600 fighters in Afghanistan.

Taliban released a statement on 26th July and while rejecting this report, has insisted that Taliban would not allow anyone to use the territory of Afghanistan against others. Taliban has also said that claims stating that ISIS is present and establishing bases in northern provinces of the country are incorrect. According to the statement, they have fought hard with ISIS and that all the relevant places are under their control. In the past month, the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team released same report which was named by the Taliban efforts to sabotage their agreement with the US.

It seems that certain groups at the international level are trying to challenge the US-Taliban agreement and link Taliban with Al-Qaida and other international extremist groups; but analysts and close sources to the Taliban believes that Taliban has no agenda beyond Afghanistan borders and that is the reason they don't want to establish links with such groups; this is what Taliban from time to time has insisted upon and has clarified their policies in this regard, as the Taliban leader insisting in an EID message

that in the future they would want friendly relations with all the countries in the world and does not want to interfere in internal affairs of any country.

Besides all the accusations, it seems that there is an environment of trust between the US and Taliban and both sides are trying to implement the agreement. After July 14th (135 days of the agreement), two other bases have been evacuated in eastern Afghanistan. Security officials of Nangarhar province has told the media that US forces have withdrawn from two bases in Achin and Haska Mina districts and has handed over the bases to Afghan forces.

Zalmi Khalilzad also started travelling to certain countries on July 27th to boost the Afghan peace process and put pressure. The US foreign ministry issued a statement on 27th July mentioning that Mr. Zalmi Khalizad the special representative for Afghan peace has started travelling to Qatar, Pakistan, Norway and Bulgaria, in addition to Afghanistan. According to the statement, Mr. Khalizad would try to resolve the remaining challenges re start of intra-Afghan talks. These efforts include prisoners' exchange and reduction in violence.

Prisoners' Exchange and Intra-Afghan Talks

During the month of July, pressure mounted for starting the intra-Afghan talks comparing to the past. Mr. Ross Wilson, Charge de Affairs of US in Kabul in a tweet, asked the Afghan leaders to take steps towards forming the new Cabinet, forming the High Council for National Reconciliation, completing the prisoners' exchange process, and commencement of intra-Afghan talks. According to him, Afghans can no more tolerate the delay in the peace process, and it is the time to start the intra-Afghan talks and pave the way for a permanent ceasefire.

Mr. Ross Wilson in another tweet on 29th July, once again welcomed the ceasefire between Afghan government and the Taliban; but insisted that Afghan government and Taliban need to start the intra-Afghan talks as soon as possible based on their commitments, and speed up the efforts to end the war.

The spokesperson for Taliban's Qatar office Mr. Sohail Shaheen also tweeted that if Afghan government releases their remaining prisoners, they would also release the remaining government prisoners and they are ready to participate in the intra-Afghan talks after EID. Although the government authorities replied to this tweet of Mr. Sohail Shaheen mentioning that the remaining 600 Taliban prisoners have criminal cases and government stance would not change regarding their release, but 200 more prisoners were released at the end of July, and the number reduced to 400. In the EID message on 31st July, President Ghani mentioned that the government has released 500 Taliban prisoners which were not included in the list of Taliban. According to him, the Taliban list includes 400 prisoners which cannot be released by the President based on country's law and a Loya Jirga would decide about them.

This announcement by the President sparked different reactions. Afghan public and political figures criticized this decision by the President and said that a large number of such prisoners have been released based on political settlement, by the decree of the President, which were accused of serious crimes and national laws were not a barrier for their release. For this reason, they are saying that the Afghan government is trying to put barriers towards the peace talks.

On the other hand, Taliban on 30th July, based on the order by the Taliban leader Mawlawi Hebatullah Akhundzada, released all the remaining prisoners of the Afghan government and by this, all the promised 1000 government prisoners were released by the Taliban.

Taliban has said through a released statement that these prisoners were released due to EID, and to fulfil the commitment made in Doha agreement and to complete the process relevant to them. The statement further adds that the process of releasing government prisoners started on 12 April (2020) and was completed in three months and 16 days. This step by Taliban has been welcomed among Afghan public and has sparked hopes that it would contribute in the start of intra-Afghan talks.

In the ending days of July, Mr. Zamir Kablov Russia's special representative for Afghanistan commented on the remaining Taliban prisoners and mentioned that the stalemate re prisoners' exchange has paused the peace process. According to him, until the prisoners' exchange process hasn't completed, any gathering or concept re peace is void. In the start of July, the acting minister of foreign affairs of Afghanistan told in a conference that the US does not have consent about releasing the concerned prisoners; that is why Russia got concerned and wanted to involve itself at this stage to have the prisoners' release process completed.

Looking at this situation, there is a concern that refusing to release the remaining prisoners of Taliban would increase mistrust and would further delay the intra-Afghan talks; but the general belief is that ultimately the government would release these prisoners as well as a result of the pressures.

Afghans deem this as an effort to create barriers towards peace; because at different times, certain prisoners accused of serious crimes have been released by the President as a result of political settlement.

Ceasefire

As expected, Taliban announced three days of EID ceasefire on 28th July and following this, the government also declared ceasefire during EID days. In a statement by Taliban,



the Taliban fighters have been ordered to avoid travelling to government controlled areas and if they come under attack by government forces, they shall respond.

The ceasefire declared by Taliban was welcomed by Afghan public and different parties. Zalmay Khalilzad the special representative for Afghan peace in a tweet mentioned that this measure would play a considerable role in creating an environment of trust for peace.

After the ceasefire announcement by Taliban in the Eid – ul – Fitr Days, the violence remained low days after the ceasefire. It is expected that the violence would remain low after the current ceasefire as well. It is also expected that as a result of present pressure and the situation created after ceasefire would result in the release of remaining Taliban prisoners and the opportunity for the start of intra-Afghan talks would be provided.

EID Message of the Taliban Leader

The Taliban leader Mawlawi Hebatullah Akhundzada has said in a released EID statement that they are willing to settle the current war in a peaceful manner and has put all the efforts in this regard. It has been mentioned that the Taliban has taken all the steps required for peace and intra-Afghan talks, but barriers are created by the US and Afghan government. He has said that the Afghan government shall not create barriers for peace and shall take practical steps to bring peace as soon as possible. He has expressed satisfaction that foreign forces are due to withdraw from Afghanistan and five military bases have been evacuated so far. He has insisted that the Taliban are committed to the agreement with the US and want the US and its allies to remain committed to the agreement and do not create barriers towards ending the war in Afghanistan. He has exemplified the violation of the agreement by the US through mentioning the following: the delay in releasing the prisoners, the black list remaining at its previous status, and the drone strikes.



He has insisted in this message that Taliban do not want monopoly in internal politics and wants friendly relations with neighboring countries and countries in the world. The same, he has insisted on the reconstruction of Afghanistan and the continued support of international community, after the withdrawal of foreign forces.

In this message of the Taliban leader, overall soft stance has been utilized and has been insisted on dialogue and intra-Afghan understanding to resolve the issue, instead of war. It also understood from the message that the Taliban is not willing to retrieve from the agreed points in the Doha agreement, and for instance has been mentioned that if the prisoners release process is not completed as they view, they would continue fighting and would not start the talks.



Analysis of the Security Situation

In the war field, different arguments, reports and reactions existed on the increased volume of violence, and an overall increased violence was noticed in the month of July comparing to the past months. Afghanistan's National Security Council released reports of the casualties due to the attacks by Taliban. Besides Taliban, Afghan government was also criticized for increasing the violence. The US special representative for Afghan peace condemned the civilian casualties in an air strike by the Afghan forces, on 22nd July in Herat and supported investigation thereto. This attack was carried out on the people gathered for the released Taliban prisoners which resulted in tens of civilian casualties.

On 13th July, after relatively calm months in the cities, an attack was carried out by Taliban on the local office of National Directorate of Security (NDS) in Aibak city, the center of Samangan province, which resulted in large number of casualties to the NDS forces. Taliban mentioned this attack as a response and reaction to the attacks by the Afghan government and claimed that in the attack 47 officials were killed and 72 others were injured. But the governor of Samangan told that in this attack 11 people were killed and 63 others were injured.

Despite the status of violence, Mr. Zalmi Khalilzad speaking to the US Institute for Peace, told that the violence has reduced in the current year. According to him, Afghan forces casualties has reduced by 40 percent, civilian casualties has also reduced and no foreign soldier has been killed since the Doha agreement.

UNAMA also has mentioned in a report that the current year is witnessing 13 percent reduction in civilian casualties comparing to the last year. But this war has been deemed as the most violent and deadly for civilians, in the world. Since January this year, 1282 civilians have been killed and 2176 others injured. Among the casualties, 340 children are killed, and 727 others injured. UNAMA has blamed the Taliban for most of the



casualties, but Taliban has denied the report and has put the attacks by Afghan forces the main reason for the civilian casualties. Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson for Taliban in a statement, has said that this report has been prepared and released based on the information obtained from security institutions, and does not reflect the real aspect of the civilian casualties.

The end

