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SECURING COMMUNITIES FOR RECONSTRUCTION: Views from Afghan community leaders in refugee camps in Iran

**Consultations with Afghan community leaders from the Afghan
refugee community in Zahedan and Mash'had, Iran.**

1. BACKGROUND

This report is the outcome of a series of discussions with Afghans in Mash'had and Zahedan, Iran, in April 2002. The participants in these discussions were mainly members of Afghan community-based groups, known for their charitable activities for Afghan refugees in both cities.

Three women and thirteen men, divided into two groups, talked about different topics that related to the security and reconstruction of Afghanistan from the viewpoints of long-term refugees in Iran. In these gatherings of Afghans, the "Focus Group Discussion" techniques were used to collect their ideas and comments on challenging issues of Afghanistan. These participants have been refugees in Iran for more than 10 years. Some have not gone back to Afghanistan for 23 years, while others have had strong links to their country. They all share an ability to organize support groups for the refugee community in Iran.

2. KEY MESSAGES

The participants believe that:

- ◆ Insecurity still prevails in Afghanistan to some extent. It mainly includes economic insecurity and instability of the political and

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military situation. Overall conditions are a cause for concern for everyday people who see that the members of previously armed groups are still in power in some regions.

- ◆ The interim administration has been able to maintain peace and stability in some areas, especially in Kabul. Participants believed it was a good start to maintain and develop relations with the neighboring countries but that there is a need to adopt a firm position against the neighboring countries which had traditionally interfered in the internal conflicts of Afghanistan. They supported an independent attitude toward foreign policy, which was absent for years from the previous administrations.
- ◆ The presence of ISAF is appreciated as long as it coordinates its activities with the new administration. The same applies to the international aid agencies. To strengthen the new administration, which is a guarantee for the sustainability of peace, neither ISAF nor aid agencies should work separately and independently from each other and from the Interim government.
- ◆ Although local rules and regulations exist in Afghanistan at community levels, there is an urgent need to develop a coherent set of law and regulations applicable to the whole country. The legal frameworks that were adopted about four decades ago should be upgraded to adjust to the new situation. However, the implementing abilities of the Shuras and the power of the local authorities over communities should be regarded as something positive. The new legal frameworks can be basically built on the existing social structure.

3. EXPECTATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Interim Administration

The new Administration should:

- ◆ Prevent discrimination against any ethnic or political groups.
- ◆ Adopt measures that weaken the economic and social advantages of those who are not in favor of sustainable peace.
- ◆ Disarm everybody throughout the country
- ◆ Establish a national army trained, but not governed by, ISAF
- ◆ Put economic and social pressure on local authorities that are not responsible to the central government, based in Kabul
- ◆ Establish central government departments at provincial levels
- ◆ Select efficient personnel that are well known for their commitment to the people, not to previous political and military powers
- ◆ Assign educated people to be in charge of responsibilities at all levels

- ◆ Recognize the importance of education in the reconstruction process of Afghanistan
- ◆ Recognize the importance of the reintegration of the returnees in the community of origin.

3.2 United Nations

The United Nations should:

- ◆ Consider the dignity of the Afghan people, which will gain the support of the members of the traditional and extremist groups.
- ◆ Be careful about the role of the international forces in Afghanistan.

3.3 Loya Jirga

The Loya Jirga should:

- ◆ Maintain a balance between the number of representatives, the population of each region, and each ethnic or social group that the candidates represent.
- ◆ Be careful about the role US, China, Saudi Arabia and Russia can play in the future of Afghanistan.
- ◆ Recognize women and girls' rights through supporting free access to education.
- ◆ Recognize women's right to contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- ◆ Enforce a coherent and nationwide set of law and regulations so that no specific group can interpret it according to its sectarian interests.

3.4 Aid Agencies

Aid agencies should:

- ◆ Avoid supporting local authorities that undermine the central government policies and guidelines.
- ◆ Be flexible to adjusting their response to the varied needs.
- ◆ Provide job opportunities and help with economic stability.

3.5 Afghan Diaspora

These were the concerns by the participants, regarding their own situation in Iran:

- ◆ Existing attempts to repatriate the refugees from Pakistan and Iran should respond to the specific needs and expectations of the long-term refugee community, and avoid the use of hasty procedures.
- ◆ No specific attention is being given to the future of the refugee children who go to school in Iran at the moment. No student has learned Pashtu, whereas some are to return to Pashtu-speaking regions. This implies an end to their ongoing education.
- ◆ Second generation Afghans in Iran, being educated in the Iranian schools, have less knowledge, interest, and link to Afghan culture. A long term cultural approach should be adapted to integrate them in their return to Afghanistan.
- ◆ The pace for providing basic means for sustainable life for returnees should be increased. Otherwise, the repatriation process will stop after a while.

4. Detailed discussions

4.1. Existing community-level security and conflict-resolution processes

Participants believed that there has been an improved level of security during the past 3-4 months inside Afghanistan. However, ISAF's (International Security Assistance Force) attention has been limited to Kabul. While many provinces are still unstable, some provinces are benefiting from a relatively peaceful environment, which is conditioned on the overall situation of the country.

It was believed that the current community-level security is due to ISAF on the one hand, and the political coalitions on the other hand. There is not a unique generalized law within the country yet, nor a national army/police to guarantee the stable security. Bearing in mind all these limitations and unresolved issues, the participants wonder what would be the government strategy to overcome the existing obstacles and provide security for the whole country.

Participants identified the unresolved issues as follows:

- Economic instability - For the last 23 years, one of the main problems has been economic instability. This is still a worrisome issue. Lack of job opportunities and financial problems were on the top of all needs, along with the security problems. It was believed that one of the reasons for people to join the political groups and militias was this lack of financial support: people could have an income by working for the political parties and showing commitment to their objectives.
- Ethnic/tribal differences and the political parties – Ethnic differences have always been a problem amongst different tribes in Afghanistan, especially in the eastern and southern frontiers. Throughout the war, political groups took advantage of the tribal differences and economic problems, and recruited people to their parties to fight with other groups.

Ethnic differences, economic problems, political parties and access to guns are still present as unresolved threats.

Participants believed that the new government should have an equal approach towards the different parties/ethnic groups and their role in political and social affairs of the country. For instance, in the recent conference in Bonn, no key role was given to the delegations from Pashtun and Tajik background. No ethnic group should feel discriminated or marginalized throughout the reconstruction phase in Afghanistan.

If any of ethnic groups feels threatened and does not see a role for itself in future construction process of Afghanistan, long-term security cannot be guaranteed. For instance, the current instabilities in the southern areas of Afghanistan resulted in a lack of attention to the Pashtun needs and to the problems encountered by the local authorities.

- Meanwhile, the majority of the people in Afghanistan are armed and this is a very important concern. People do not feel safe if there are armed groups moving freely from one region to another throughout the country.
- Level of education and awareness amongst Afghan people – Lack of awareness and general education has led many people to support the armed groups. People could not predict that the consequences of joining the armed groups would be harmful to such an extent. The participants believed that lack of social awareness is still an issue.

4.2. The community and the center

➤ Most of the participants were optimistic towards the new administration's performance so far. They believed that for the first time in 23 years the whole country was benefiting from a relatively secure environment. During the past months in Kabul, government offices have been reactivated, people have been disarmed, and the Interim Administration's armed force is in training. These activities are positive steps, and everyone hopes that they would be replicated in other provinces as well.

Participants also believed that the main responsibility of the interim administration is to maintain the same level of security throughout the country.

➤ However, as mentioned above, one of the main concerns is the free movement of armed elements all over the country. Some members of the armed groups, although not carrying guns nowadays, have been appointed as officials. The new administration should consider a strategy to minimize the threats of these groups. It was believed that the new administration could involve people to address this issue. People supported these armed groups for several reasons, from political viewpoints to economic reasons. These groups became more powerful due to public support. Now, it has changed; everyone is fed up with war and instability and would not risk security by supporting those groups. When people trust the new government, they will cooperate to improve the sustainable peaceful environment, too.

➤ Participants mentioned also that inappropriate policy and strategy of the previous governments towards other countries (Pakistan, Iran, Russia and the United States) led to the external interference of these countries in the political situation of Afghanistan. Each of these countries supported one of the political parties and got involved directly in Afghanistan's political affairs. It was believed that the new government should take a firm position to avoid that kind of interference.

➤ The degree to which aid programmes help to secure peace depends on the level of their coordination with the government. Meantime the new administration needs to make sure the international NGOs are sincere in their intentions to assist with the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Another concern is the aid agencies' approach within the communities. If different regions are not provided with equal attention and people in different areas feel discriminated against, or if aid agencies do not reach the people through community leaders, insecurity would increase.

The type of the aid provided to communities needs to be identified according to the level and types of needs of the people. In the drought-affected areas, communities have intensive needs and should be provided with relief assistance. This approach would prevent further displacement to other areas as well. However, for other areas with reduced relief needs, rehabilitation and development programmes need to be provided to improve the self-reliance of the community.

4.3. Law and public order

➤ Participants pointed out that there are legal instruments within the existing social structure at present. In some cases, they are the community leaders (groups of individuals) who define the legal instruments and use them as required. In some other cases, these instruments and processes have been defined, according to Islamic interpretation (correctly or incorrectly). There have also been cases where these legal processes are defined to support a specific political party. As a result, law and regulations vary from region to region and can change when the community leaders change.

➤ Participants believed that the existing legal instruments should be adopted in some cases and changed in other cases. Many of them did not believe in the efficiency of the existing local laws and wanted to replace them with a coherent legal framework for the whole country.

➤ At the community level, Shuras guarantee that the legal processes are observed. Participants suggested that this specific role should be continued.

➤ The participants emphasized that although a unique and nationwide set of laws and regulations were needed, the Shuras should have a supervisory role in laying down the law. Participants did not want leaders of the community to set their own rules and this concern was repeated frequently. Shuras could only be an instrument to promote the legal framework within the community.

➤ One of the main concerns of the participants was the number of members from each region in the Loya Jirga. They believed that number of members from a region should be in accordance with the total population of that region.

4.4. International interventions

- There is no doubt that the foreign troops should play an important role in supporting the interim government, even though at the moment the presence of the ISAF and foreign troops is limited to Kabul. Participants were optimistic with the future events and believed that the foreign troops are needed to impose the security for a short time. Once the Loya Jirga is formed, the national armed forces are trained, and people are disarmed, the foreign troops will not be required anymore.
- In the longer term, the role of the United States should be differentiated from ISAF. Noting the role of United States in the recent crisis, Afghan people are concerned about the makeup of countries within ISAF. According to future conditions, the presence of the ISAF might be required, but only if it could be separated from the United States forces¹.
- Participants mentioned that there have been some occasions where the foreign troops exacerbate the tension amongst people. For instance, in the eastern frontiers where the Taliban has had more supporters or when a pregnant woman was allegedly killed by them after the curfew. According to the participants it happened after 10 pm.
- The perceived responsibility of the Interim government armed forces is to maintain a secure environment for people. In fact, this reason has been the driving force behind young people from different areas planning to join the Interim government army. But Afghanistan Ministry of Interior should govern the armed forces so that people can trust it. At the moment, they believe none of the relevant government bodies are in charge of the establishment of the army so people doubt its commitment and loyalty to the people's overall interests.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief was prepared by Nastaran Moossavi and Sepideh Youssefzadeh in cooperation with the Harvard Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research.

The Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research is a research and policy program based at the Harvard School of Public Health in Cambridge, MA. The Program is engaged in research and advisory services on humanitarian operations and the protection of civilians in conflict areas. The Program advises organizations such as the United Nations, governments, and non-governmental actors and focuses on the protection of vulnerable groups, conflict prevention, strategic planning for human security, and the role of information technology in emergency response. HPCR was established in August 2000 with the support of the Government of Switzerland and in cooperation with the United Nations.

(Footnotes)

¹ Some of the participants pointed out that they have the same concerns regarding China, Saudi Arabia and Russia.