

# The Business

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## Taliban mily offensive

The Taliban military offensive is already reaping benefits to the Taliban in the shape of the fall of isolated Afghan government outposts along the country's borders because Kabul is unable to sustain its forces in those areas in terms of air support, logistics, supplies and reinforcements. The Taliban have captured major border crossing points with almost all of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. This development has Moscow worried that the conflict could spill over into Central Asia through fundamentalists infiltrating into the region from Afghanistan. Russia has military bases in Central Asia and has been hinting at using its forces to prevent such a spillover. Interestingly, while the situation on the ground in the battlefields of Afghanistan suggests the Afghan government forces are crumbling despite brave words from Kabul that it would retake the territories captured by the Taliban, the latter's delegation on a visit to Moscow has attempted to play down the apprehensions about Central Asia by pledging not to allow any such infiltration/incursions and also tried to reassure all of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used against them. Since a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would bolster the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's scarcely disguised aim to resurrect its terrorist activities inside Pakistan from its bases across the border on Afghan soil.

The Taliban have already pledged in the Doha agreement with the departing US that Afghanistan's soil would never again be allowed to be used against the US or its allies. The US, apart from mealy-mouthed expressions of supporting Afghanistan from 'afar', has for all intents and purposes turned its back on Afghanistan and left it to its fate.

That fate increasingly looms as an internecine civil war, with no certainty that the Afghan government forces, in alliance with anti-Taliban ethnic militias and armed women's and civilian groups will be able to hold off the determined Taliban.

While the Taliban 'charm' offensive has tried to portray the intentions of the group not to repeat some of the extreme brutality during their 1996-2001 period in power, there are few takers for this assurance. The attempt to convince international opinion of the Taliban's newfound reasonableness can be ascribed to their realization that even if they come to power, they will not be able to sustain their hold or run an aid-dependent, wrecked country, especially since the troika of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the only three countries that recognised their government in 1996, will probably not extend this or any material largesse this time round. Now that the Taliban feel they are on the road to outright military victory, they are even less inclined than ever to heed Islamabad's advice to explore peace, reconciliation and power sharing with the Afghan government.

## Afghanistan: Talking peace



AZAZ SYED

Friday, Kabul, Afghanistan: as he walked down the stairs of his office – holding a cane in one hand, I stepped forward to shake hands with him. About six feet tall, full-bodied, this middle-aged man had once – during the Soviet era – worked for the Afghan secret service 'KHAD'. This is the same KHAD that had close ties with the Soviet intelligence agency KGB, and which was once also accused of terrorism inside Pakistan.

In 1987, at the age of 19, he lost his leg while defending his homeland in Jalalabad. At the time, he was a communist and also a critic of Pakistan. After a while, when Kabul was captured by the Taliban, he was forced into exile in Britain.

The man I was meeting was none other than Afghan Foreign Minister Mohammad Haneef Atmar, who has served as the minister of interior and as the national security advisor in Afghanistan – and who is now the Afghan foreign minister.

In what is both surprising and encouraging, I discovered that while Atmar may disagree with Pakistan, he is not against Pakistan. There is a thin line between disagreeing with someone or something and being against someone or something. Disagreement is based on rational argument which can be countered with logic and even

explained away. But irrational opposition is based on hatred which is the enemy of reason. Atmar believes that Pakistan has the potential to play a key role in resolving the Afghanistan issue.

During the meeting, Foreign Minister Atmar also told me that he had solid evidence that the Taliban are fighting the Afghan government with the cooperation of other international terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jundullah and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement in China and the alleged terrorist group Islamic Movement in Uzbekistan. It is important to remember that in the past we in Pakistan used to think that the TTP was being sheltered by the Afghan government. While that may have been so, in time the group began to side with those opposed to the Afghan government. According to the Afghan foreign minister, if the Taliban take over Afghanistan, the country will become a hub for terrorist organizations, leading to the most dire repercussions for Pakistan, India, China and Uzbekistan.

Just a day before, here in Kabul, the Afghan defence minister had met with Indian defence officials. I broached the subject of whether Afghanistan is getting defence assistance from India. Atmar said that in the past Afghan army officers had been trained by India and provided with helicopters, but that he was unaware of any new cooperation regarding defence between Afghanistan and India. When I drew the attention of the foreign minister to Pakistan's concerns regarding India, he said that Afghanistan had assured Pakistan that it would not allow anyone to use its territory against Pakistan. For his part, the Afghan foreign minister hopes that Pakistan will bring the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table and help Afghanistan cut off their supplies.

At the end of our meeting, the Afghan foreign minister also lightly praised Prime Minister Imran Khan and said that he had heard positive statements from Pakistan's Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and DG ISI Faiz Hameed, and would like

DR AYESHA RAZZAQUE

Last year, on May 20 (2020), the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) issued a notice to the management of Sunrise Publications for printing and selling a booklet series for pre-primary (3-5 year-olds) titled 'Infant Mathematics' without obtaining an NOC. Apparently, it included content the PCTB deemed "detrimental for examination and assessment purposes or repugnant to the injunction of Islam or contrary to the integrity, defence or security of Pakistan, or any part of Pakistan or public order or morality" [sic].

Readers should keep in mind that obtaining an NOC has been a requirement de jure for private textbook publishers for years. However, the PCTB's lack of capacity to review books and issue NOCs in a timely manner meant that this requirement remained de facto unenforced. But every now and then, when an influential person with access makes a complaint to the highest authorities or a random individual files a public interest case (as happened in December 2020 in Altamash versus the Government of Punjab), the PCTB jumps into action and weaponizes the requirement for an NOC. In last year's instance, it was to save preschoolers from the 'repugnant act' of counting three cartoon piglets and all the "threats to the integrity, defence and security of Pakistan" that carries with it.

The PCTB is back in the news. This time it has issued a notice (dated July 13, 2021) to the Oxford University Press for printing and selling another pre-primary book for the last two years (since 2019), predating the new textbook review process it put into place this year. The PCTB's notice does not cite any violation besides the lack of an NOC. But then, older private textbooks/ supplementary materials were never issued NOCs. In that respect, this book is no different from many others from that period. The book in question was reportedly submitted to the PCTB for review in 2019, along with thousands of other books. It was returned without NOC, with a suggestion to resub-

mit when the review of books for the SNC starts. The PCTB's lack of readiness to follow its own rules meant that this book, like others, kept being sold without an NOC. Despite assurances, it has been unable to expedite the issuance of NOCs in a timely manner due to its tedious review process, while the start of the already much delayed academic year looms in August.

With no other identifiable content that could be deemed objectionable, it appears the PCTB is once again responding to assuage offence caused by Malala's picture to the sensibilities of someone influential enough to move the wheels of the bureaucracy. Incidentally, these events also coincide with July 12, which happens to be Malala's birthday and the day the UN has declared as World Malala Day for her education activism work.

The 'offensive' lesson contains a portrait of Malala Yousafzai in a lesson titled 'Important People'. It opens with the line, "Here are some of our heroes", and lists pictures and names of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Liaqat Ali Khan underneath. On the opposite page it continues, "Here are some famous people" and lists pictures and names of Abdul Sattar Edhi, Begum Raana Liaqat Ali Khan, Major Aziz Bhatti, and Malala Yousafzai, in that order. That is all. Yet, such a grave offence is the inclusion of Malala in a list of 'famous people' that bookshops are being raided, books confiscated, and sternly worded official notices issued to the publisher (but no other). Predictably, Pakistani Twitter erupted at this news. If you still think that the inclusion of Malala in a lesson listing some famous personalities cannot possibly be the reason, take a gander on Pakistani Twitter today and witness the venom spewed by so many literate, internet connected fellow citizens, seemingly blinded by jealousy.

A country infected by the old-boys mentality is unwilling to bestow the descriptor of 'famous person' or hero on someone who does not meet any of our hero standards: a) she is alive; b) she is a woman; c) she is young; d) she lives in the West; e) she was not from the 'elite class' (politically, so-

cially or economically) we show servility to; and f) she is not the underdog victim that makes us feel good about defending her. This is petty, small-minded, jealousy that seeks to drag down those who manage to achieve something despite odds. It is as simple as that and there is no need to intellectualize it.

According to its own website, the PCTB's raison d'être is to develop textbooks, "understanding curriculum and pedagogy of the subject", review textbooks "for assurance of quality and error free" [sic], publish, supply and check piracy. However, the PCTB has abdicated the responsibility of developing textbooks and has instead adopted the ones developed by the National Curriculum Council (NCC) in Islamabad. Its capacity to review textbooks seems to be solely focused on sanitizing textbooks according to an extreme right-wing ideology that requires girls and women to wear hijabs and does not allow recognition of Malala as a famous Pakistani. Pedagogical priorities have firmly taken a back seat. If the PCTB has surrendered its primary roles of developing and pedagogically reviewing textbooks, does it still need to exist?

I wonder what, according to the PCTB, the ideal textbook looks like. Will it be a book that all 120 million of Punjab's citizens agree to and that caters to a common denominator? What does that even look like? For the answer, look at past textbooks. Urdu and Social Studies textbooks rarely venture beyond praising Quaid-e-Azam, Allama Iqbal, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Liaqat Ali Khan, and a handful of martyrs of the 1965 war and more recently Arfa Karim and Ruth Pfau, both deceased. Many other personalities are deemed too controversial.

Yet, important questions we should be asking ourselves have fallen by the wayside: can there be no room for a difference of opinion in textbooks that lend themselves for discussions? That seems to be the idea the PCTB has. Where then, does that leave the goals of fostering critical thinking in children? Do we wish our society to be one where the state bans books for the smallest perceived infractions, a la an Orwellian dystopia?

The PCTB ought to look in the

mirror and see who is standing by it – the usual clique of unappointed guardians of public morality and mob of non-experts while independent and unaffiliated area experts have largely coalesced on the other side of the argument. It is also worth noting that the end of what some call Pakistan's golden period in public education roughly coincides with the establishment of the Punjab Textbook Board (now the PCTB) in the 1960s, and the decline that followed tracks the increasingly tighter control of government departments on education. With the PCTB making one misstep after another in recent years, is it not time for some introspection?

It is also worth noting that criticism of the PCTB's operations is bipartisan. A few days ago, Minister for Information and Broadcasting Fawad Chaudhry lent his voice to the issue by putting it plainly: "The trend in Punjab has been problematic. Before this issue they banned a book like 'The First Muslim' and they banned Raza Aslan's book... if we keep following this trend the issue of extremism which is already plaguing us is going to become an even deeper issue, causing serious social issues". He also referred to the inclusion of the Muttahida Ulema Board in the process of book review, a problematic step – albeit by an act of parliament.

The geopolitical situation on our borders is rapidly changing following the US troop pull-out from Afghanistan. Pro-Taliban right-wingers are coming back out of their closets after the APS attack. According to a report from Radio Free Europe filed from Mazar-e-Sharif on July 14, "Women banned from going outside alone. Girls barred from attending school. Unmarried women forced to marry fighters"; This is contrary to the stories of reformed Taliban we have been hearing from their apologists on evening talk shows.

The question to ask of ourselves as a nation is: do we think of ourselves as pro-Malala, an international symbol and champion of girls' education, or would we rather align ourselves with regressive extremism because our resentment and hate for Malala's fame and good fortune outweighs the damage that the extremists have already started inflicting?

## Resettlement in Tharparkar

AMIR HUSSAIN

In my article of July 4, 2021 published in these pages as 'Transition in Tharparkar', I shared some of my thoughts about the contested nature of the intellectual debate of transition. This article is a summary of the local perspective of transition narrated by villagers who have undergone resettlement due to coal extraction. Some 175 families were provided new houses, social facilities and an annual cost of relocation while many other families were paid cash as relocation and replacement cost of land, livelihood and housing in a lump sum.

For an outsider and a social development specialist like me, this may look like a simple land acquisition and resettlement plan without any need for a fussy debate. But once you descend from the comfort zones of intellectual debate to the ground realities, it is an entirely different world. The agony of resettlement was splendidly articulated by the relocated villagers. I am happy to share the summary of this local perspective with my readers and I leave it to their good judgment to interpret it.

"Our open and airy compounds with bush fencing, our mud houses with straw roofs and our traditional hearths with clay and stone are not only inventory assets of a resettlement plan. They are spaces where our relationship has evolved, our culture and memories of togetherness have shaped for centuries. "In 2018 they came to our village and told us that they were going to build state-of-the-art modern homes. They also said that we were lucky to live in a modern housing society with sanitation facilities and other urban amenities like schools, community centers and a recreational space. Our newly constructed residential colony had accommodation for all 175 households affected by coal extraction. Since then, we have been living in this colony in a small space of nestled houses.

"We were not used to living in a congested space like this with nestled houses and without an open space in front of our homes. Now we feel a bit claustrophobic as if we have been robbed of our breathing space, our privacy and most of all our culture and emotional affinities. We know it was not all deliberate to banish us from our lands; it was rather due to the lack of understanding of our state of being, culture – and lack of empathy towards the poor. We would love to be seen as human beings who feel, think, react, respond, express. "It does not take a concrete house to live happily, it is the sense of community, solidarity, sharing and caring which keeps us together and which motivates us to assist each other. They think that we are happy in a cramped place; but their premise of keeping us happy has opened the floodgates of miseries on us. We had

livestock with grazing open grounds, dug wells with water and large swathe of land to roam around to fetch water in the days of drought and to collect fuel wood from the wilderness of nature. Today all we have is a better house from the outside for a visitor like yourself and many others who come here and count the roofs of our houses from a distance and appreciate its builders and walk away. We do not feature as living beings in the imagination of an outsider who usually keeps a reasonable distance from us as if we are only objects in the grand scheme of corporate excellence.

"The houses we live in are not our own and we have been told that we cannot sell them or even make any alteration to the existing housing structures. They say that after the proper registration these houses will be transferred to us; after the two years of our stay here it has not happened though. The roofs of most of the houses have developed leakages and during the rains we cannot stay inside our concrete homes. We all feel nostalgic about our mud and straw houses, in particular when it rains. "We have no issue whether you extract coal, diamond or gold. We are worried about our water being extracted from the ground beneath us. What would we do with money and concrete houses when we have no water to raise our animals, to drink and to grow our crops? Who denies the comfort of living a decent life with good houses, better schools and better access roads for our children? We acknowledge the good intentions of the investors in our area but we feel that they have only a partial understanding of what it takes to spend a comfortable and decent life in our case.

"You could have taught us the ways of smart agriculture; you could have provided us alternate water sources for our animals and for our domestic use as your extractive activities are drying up our lands. Had you invested in making us prosperous we would have built our own houses with open spaces, and we would not have burdened you. "An outsider may say that we are anti-development; we do not want to change, and we are unscrupulous in demanding money from private companies. But if you reduce us to objects, you will see us resisting to restore our human dignity. This is not the first time that we have faced transition and rapid change. We have experienced a transition more than two decades ago from an agropastoral barter system to a money-mediated economy. Thanks to the Thardeep Rural Development Program (TRDP) for helping us to weather the storms of transition and to steer us towards a decent and empowering life of self-expression. "We hope that private companies will learn the secret of locally owned development, as practiced by the TRDP".

