

The Business

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Afghan situation

About 46 Afghan government soldiers, including five officers, deployed at a military post near the Pak-Afghan border requested refuge and safe passage from the Pakistani authorities. According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the Afghan soldiers arrived at the Arundu sector, Chitral, late at night. After contact with the Afghan authorities and necessary military procedures, the ISPR statement went on, these soldiers were given refuge, food, shelter and necessary medical care. The soldiers would be returned to the Afghan government in a dignified manner after due process. ISPR also recalled a similar incident involving 35 Afghan government soldiers asking for refuge on July 1, 2021, who had been similarly treated. In contrast, however, to this 'pleasant' ISPR statement, the Afghan Ministry of Defence flatly denied that any of their forces had sought refuge from Pakistan, adding the Afghan government had reservations about Pakistan. This may reflect the present tense relations between the two neighbouring countries, including the incident involving the Afghan Ambassador's daughter in Islamabad, which led to the withdrawal of the Ambassador and other Afghan diplomats. However, notwithstanding the Afghan Ministry of Defence's denial, it is worth noting that 1,037 Afghan government troops crossed into Tajikistan for similar reasons not so long ago.

The Afghan Taliban, since the start of their offensive in May 2021, have concentrated on taking isolated posts and border crossings while mounting pressure on several provincial capitals. This is the classic guerrilla strategy of indirect approach, i.e., attacking the enemy at his weakest points, nibbling away at his outlying, stretched strength, while progressively tightening the noose around the towns and big cities. The Afghan government's soldiers in such isolated posts cut off from supplies and reinforcements are forced to seek the help of neighbouring countries to save their lives.

The Afghan air force is virtually grounded without US aid, spares and maintenance. Although withdrawing, the US has begun airstrikes inside Afghanistan, but it remains to be clarified whether they are hitting identified al Qaeda and Islamic State targets alone or also the Afghan Taliban. While US forces turn their backs on a country where they waged a 20-year war without end, the real test of the Afghan government they helped install and the military and security forces they armed, trained and built up during those two decades is now unfolding. The government forces seem to have responded to the Taliban gambit by a strategy of focusing on the defence of the large cities and towns. However, whether this will prove feasible once the war in the countryside rolls into the cities remains to be seen. Brave words from Kabul about retaking lost territories still have to show some concrete results. Al Qaeda has moderated a reunification of some TTP splinter groups, which has strengthened the terrorist outfit further. All this does not bode well for the impact of the war's spillover into Pakistan.

Not on talking terms

AHMED BILAL MEHBOOB

The five-member Election Commission of Pakistan is once again lacking its full strength after members belonging to Punjab and KP retired on July 26. The last time when there was a similar situation upon the retirement of two ECP members in January 2019, the appointment of new members remained stuck for a whole year. The ECP had to make do with only three members including the chief election commissioner (CEC) which is the minimum number required to keep the commission functional.

Subsequently, when the ECP chief also retired in December 2019 and the number of members dropped to two, the commission became non-functional and remained so for 53 days until a new (the present incumbent) CEC was appointed along with two other ECP members in January last year. This was despite the fact that the Constitution required, rather obligated, that the vacant position of CEC or an ECP member be filled within 45 days. Filling vacancies at the ECP should have been a routine affair as the dates of retirement of each member are known well ahead of time and the government and other stakeholders can search for suitable candidates, complete consultations and get the final names approved by the concerned parliamentary committee — all in time without keeping the posts unfilled even for a day. The constitutionally mandated maximum period of 45 days to fill the vacancies is a concession which should not be required except in extraordinary circumstances, and routinely exceeding even this period should be unacceptable. Besides the recent two vacancies, three positions in the ECP fell vacant during the past three years and all three were filled after the grace period of 45 days was over. In two cases, the positions remained vacant way beyond the time allowed by the Constitution.

At the centre of the delay is non-compliance with the provision of the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which, following the

increasing global trend to not leave the selection of election commissioners to the executive alone, made it mandatory for the prime minister to consult the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly and forward three names agreed upon for each vacancy to the parliamentary committee to be constituted for the purpose.

In case no consensus is reached between the prime minister and the opposition leader over the names of the candidates, each may forward three names per vacancy separately to the committee which is supposed to have an equal number of members from the ruling and opposition parties. Both Houses of parliament are represented in the committee with the Senate holding a third of the committee membership. The committee finally confirms one name for appointment against each position. Although the committee is free to devise its rules, the committee constituted last time had decided to make decisions by a simple majority. During the process of appointment of two members of the commission in 2019, a problem had arisen at two levels. The key issue was the refusal of Prime Minister Imran Khan to engage in in-person consultations with the leader of the opposition. This refusal was embedded in the politics pursued by Imran Khan much before he came to power. He strongly believes and publicly professes that the leaders of the two major opposition parties — the PML-N and PPP — are corrupt; they have stolen national wealth and therefore he cannot sit with them, let alone enter into consultations with them. Even in sensitive national security situations such as the Indian aggression against Pakistan and the resulting war-like situation in February 2019, he avoided meeting the opposition, and instead, the army chief held discussions with the opposition leaders.

Apparently, the prime minister and the PTI believe that their narrative of corruption about their opponents has served them well and played a decisive role in their election victory in 2018. It seems that they have concluded that any meeting and in-person

consultations between Imran Khan and the opposition will weaken the corruption narrative which, they believe, is the mainstay of their public support. Prime Minister Khan was even reluctant to personally write to the leader of the opposition to fulfil the constitutional formality of 'consultation', and instead, asked PTI parliamentary leader Shah Mahmood Qureshi to propose the names of the candidates for ECP membership. He, however, finally wrote a letter under his name after Shehbaz Sharif, leader of the opposition, rejected Shah Mahmood Qureshi's letter. Since written communication worked last time and no legal objection was raised, the same mode of consultation, in all likelihood, will be employed this time as well. Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry has categorically ruled out any direct Imran-Shehbaz consultation on ECP appointments only a few days back. The question that arises, is that if this is what the PTI plans to do, why delay the process. The letter from the prime minister should have been written by now for the two-stage process for the appointment of two ECP members to get underway.

The second problem likely to be encountered is the possible deadlock in the parliamentary committee where the government and opposition have an equal number of votes. Last time, the government and opposition had settled the matter through 'give and take' and this may turn out to be the way out even this time. It is rather sad that, instead of agreeing on a candidate who has the right credentials, as was done in the case of the current CEC, the two sides have generally opted to bargain, leading to the acceptance of a candidate each from the ruling and opposition parties. Over 10 years ago, Pakistan, through the 18th Amendment, had taken a progressive step to provide for consultation between the government and opposition for the appointment of ECP members. Our political leaders should not allow such a democratic provision to act as a drag on the appointment process instead of enhancing the credibility of the ECP and the democratic

Textbooks of 'respectabil-



DR. AYESHA RAZZAQUE

Who we are as individuals depends in large measure on the combined effects of many contributing factors. Our educational experiences, cultural and social influences of family and friends, books read, media consumed, life events, etc all collectively shape our worldview and identity. While all these influences exist, perhaps schools have a primary powerful role in influencing and shaping common values and conditioning members of society.

Irrespective of the party in power, this is the one thing our governments have been adept at, except that the values they chose to inculcate are ones that for years failed to acknowledge diversity of people (beyond the customary picture of traditional regional dresses hardly seen in the areas they represent), beliefs (only Muslims, beyond an odd mention of non-Muslims), gender roles and family structure that make up this nation. They forgo teaching empathy and tolerance for diverging opinions, beliefs, and lifestyles but instead teach a monolithic view of society in which everything is just either black or white. Good and bad are stereotyped, often not explicitly but implicitly interwoven — in the books, instruction, and behaviors of teachers. A lot of criticism has been directed (deservedly so) at the new SNC textbooks, especially the adaptation of the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB). I have picked issues in the current PCTB SNC primary textbooks that are easy to appreciate and illustrate that textbook development is a huge responsibility. We can see the effects of decades of implicit

messaging in curricula playing out in today's society. Public departments ought to be held responsible for treating this responsibility as casually as they have.

The issue of token inclusion of religious minorities in the new PCTB textbooks has already been receiving coverage. Another issue is the depiction of all women and girls in these books all covered up, without exception. The implicit lesson this teaches is that wearing a dupatta (or almost always a hijab) is the only acceptable way to dress for girls and women all across the country. That, however, is not the reality of the world we live in. Every day girls and women step out of the house making a wide range of sartorial choices. A disingenuous defence might argue that nowhere does any book explicitly instruct to dress up a certain way. That is how implicit instruction works and has been used for decades to hard wire into young minds a narrow definition of acceptable beliefs and appearances of women. Let me illustrate the effects with some anecdotes of children's behaviors that I observed first-hand.

On one occasion a young boy, hardly 7-8 years old, in a supermarket in an upscale sector of Islamabad saw an expat woman wearing cropped pants and perfectly appropriate attire. When he saw her, he turned to his mother and exclaimed, 'Nangi aurat!' (Naked woman!). On another occasion a little girl, also a primary schooler, at the Islamabad airport noticed a young woman wearing a kurta with tights, as is mainstream fashion in cities. She too turned to her mother and uttered almost the exact same words as the boy in the preceding anecdote. Both children were programmed, by parents, society and/or schools, to view the women they saw as deviants.

It is quite clear that PCTB textbooks are continuing the tradition of conditioning young minds that women and girls need to dress a certain way to command respect. Such narrow standards lead to insensitive, uninformed and misguided commentary when cases of harassment (and worse) against women become public. Another area where textbooks do not reflect contemporary Pakistani society is the utter lack of diversity of

family structures. There are many lessons across textbooks that describe a family. Every family depicted in government textbooks has the same structure — a father and mother, children and paternal grandparents with no variation beyond that. Textbooks do not acknowledge, thus messaging disapproval, of the possibility that a family can be a single parent family, for whatever reasons. If you want to know why this lack of diversity is problematic, consider what a school principal recently told me about a young child admitted to the early grades at her school.

Several teachers were unable to engage this child who remained quiet and had trouble getting along with peers. He was sent to the principal to be supervised directly like other 'problem children'. One day the principal was talking to a group of children about how families may look different. To her surprise the child came up to her during break and told her he wanted to talk. It turned out that the child was under tremendous stress because his mother had a male friend while the father was working abroad. When the principal brought up this conversation with the child's mother, she explained that the child's father had been deceased for years, but she could not bring herself to break it to her child and had told him a lie about how the father was working abroad. This is not a one-off incident as I have learnt in my conversations with several school principals, particularly those of good, independent private schools on a mission that put the well-being of all children ahead of profit margins. How a child perceives his/her own family in comparison to the 'ideal' shown in most Pakistani books (and, while we are at it, in Pakistani TV dramas) becomes an important determinant of his/her happiness and well-being.

While self-appointed morality police will consider the idea of exposing children to the diverse nature of families a sign of the end-times, how long are we going to submit to these regressive minds at the expense of the mental well-being of our children? It should not just be acceptable, but a necessary practice to normalize all types of families, including single parent families, families where children

have lost one or both parents and are living with aunts, uncles, or grandparents, or as orphans. There is no such thing as the ideal composition of a family. Ideal for a child is where the child is happy and thriving — living with both parents and in a joint family system does not necessarily guarantee that.

Women's fashion and surrounding sensibilities and social norms are constantly changing, but textbooks remain stuck in a time bubble that perhaps never was. Textbooks must catch up to reflect not just our society, but the wider world as well, lest children be hit by culture shock the moment they encounter someone who does not look or dress as they think they ought to.

When you spend decades programming a population to accept a narrow standard of social and cultural appropriateness for women, in a set of roles all connected to men (daughter, sister, wife, mother), never as an independent person (single) or decision maker (single parent), you perpetuate misogyny. That taught or tolerated misogyny makes it acceptable to make public sexist remarks like threatening to slap a woman 'to expose her real face.' Sexist language becomes an acceptable weapon in public political discourse. Much the same applies to using religion, blasphemy and anti-Semitism as a club to be wielded against opponents. When sexist and religious attacks become socially acceptable, they become part of the campaign arsenal because they work, and the crowds love it.

Our books and standards of respectability remain frozen in some long-ago century. How can we expect children to grow up accepting different beliefs and ways of living when their lessons continue to perpetuate antiquated biases instead of challenging them? The simple truth is that these textbooks are regressive.

Threats of violence against women and justification of such violence when it occurs show that women lose sympathies the moment they step outside of set 'boundaries', as we have seen in too many recent cases — and our books reinforce this message. Should we then really be surprised when a five-year-old calls you 'naked' because you are not dressed in PTCB-



Urban flood risk

AHMAD ALI GUL

The alarming visuals that have come out of the recent deadly flooding in Islamabad's Sector E-11 have sparked a public discourse on whether or not this was a 'natural disaster'. The authorities promptly blamed 'cloudburst' for the disaster, adding a little known terminology to the public discourse. Many among the internet-using public connected the flooding in Islamabad with the floods wreaking havoc in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, citing climate change as the common denominator.

I believe it is important to have a public discourse on climate change and its devastating impacts which increase disaster risk and can have induced effects such as heavy localised rainfall or 'cloudbursts'. But irrespective of the role of climate change in this extreme weather, we must be careful not to attribute the disaster solely to it. In fact, it is unfair to brush it off as another 'natural' disaster where the focus of the public is diverted to response and relief rather than poor governance and the human choices that caused the disaster. This confused messaging has caused a significant portion of the population to believe that disasters are a manifestation of the wrath of the heavens and that there is little that can be done to prevent them. Countless academicians and researchers have pointed out the term 'natural disaster' is misleading as it shifts responsibility from human choices to the forces of nature. Disaster risk is a product of 'hazard' and 'vulnerability'. In the case of the Islamabad flooding, the former would be an extreme hydrometeorological phenomenon. It is likely that this phenomenon was exacerbated by climate change.

However, hazard alone would not have turned into a disaster had it not intersected conditions of vulnerability and exposure, which encompass all physical, socioeconomic and environmental factors that increase our susceptibility to hazards. Vulnerability is perpetuated by decades of poor governance and choices which are a key driver of disaster risk. For the residents of E-11, some part of their vulnerability was created by risk-insensitive land-use planning and flood zoning, by constricting and creating bottlenecks in natural waterways, and by ill-designed drainage structures clogged by solid waste. Such conditions are not uncommon in urban areas across Pakistan, even in Islamabad. As the flood ravaged parts of the capital, the students of the Capital University of Science and Technology shared alarming videos and photographs on social media as their entire campus appeared surrounded by deep turbid waters. Before someone says 'natural disaster', it must be men-



tioned that the entire campus is constructed on the floodplains of the Soan River, only a few feet away from its main channel.

Flooding in Abbottabad earlier last month, where life was mostly disrupted, once again points to decades of poor planning and governance shortcomings in our urban areas. Flood risk was exacerbated over the years not only by unchecked encroachments on waterways but also by diminishing green permeable surfaces that were replaced with concrete structures and impermeable paved surfaces. Taking measures such as increasing green infrastructure, and implementing adequate land-use planning and regulation not only in the city but also in the upstream catchment areas of urban streams could significantly reduce the risk of urban flooding. Another challenge that remains unaddressed is assigning responsibility to enforce the existing regulations — especially as there are a plethora of municipality corporations, cantonment boards and highway authorities, among other federal, provincial and local authorities.

Considering the toll disasters take on life and development outcomes, preventing them and reducing disaster risk appear to be common sense. However, trapped somewhere between the immediacy of the disaster response and the allure of expensive development projects, 'disaster-risk reduction' fails to draw sustained attention or policy and political commitment. Many of our political figures prefer to be seen as saviours as they hand out rations during disaster-relief activities, an exercise that takes precedence over building storm drainage networks and green infrastructure, and passing legislation to mitigate the effects of climate change. Integrating disaster-risk reduction into sectoral policy and the national agenda seems to be piecemeal and lacks concerted efforts.

Similarly, authorities constitutionally mandated to work in all phases of disaster management appear to limit their role to reactive disaster response, relief and rehabilitation, neglecting proactive measures such as disaster-risk reduction. People should not have to become homeless, or lose their lives or livelihoods, because no one is paying attention.