

DAWN

TODAY'S PAPER | JANUARY 23, 2022

Mobilising the ummah

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The writer is a former foreign secretary of Pakistan.

AFTER four decades of war and misery, Afghanistan is once again in the middle of a serious crisis, this time a humanitarian

catastrophe that is about to unfold. Warnings are pouring in. The UN and many of its concerned agencies have expressed deep concern about the imminent economic collapse of as well as the dire humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. Calls have also been made by civil society and concerned governments, especially neighbours. Voices have also arisen in the US, such as a collective article published in the *Atlantic Council* by several concerned Americans.

Why is it then that no one is stepping forward at the required scale and quantum to help the people of Afghanistan who are up against a harsh winter? Two complications are obvious.

One, the UN sanctions regime 1267 imposed against the Taliban has not been rescinded, making the banks and companies nervous in doing business with Afghan entities. A serious liquidity crisis has cropped up. Civil servants, teachers, soldiers and municipal committees cannot be paid their salaries. Banks are not entertaining letters of credit to import or export anything into or out of Afghanistan. Regardless of who is in power in Kabul, it is the people of Afghanistan who are now bearing the brunt of the world's indifference.

Will the Muslim world help Afghanistan?

The second issue of concern is that poverty levels are rising

steeply. Soon, an overwhelming majority of the population of Afghanistan will be below the poverty line. In such a situation, there should be simply no politics. It should not matter that the Taliban are now ruling Afghanistan. Recognition of the Taliban government is a question that is not on top of the list of issues that the international community is seized of. Politics can wait. But economic collapse will hurt the ordinary Afghans; the world would not be able to forgive itself for the neglect if the humanitarian tragedy leads to large-scale fatalities.

Read: [*Afghanistan's humanitarian disaster*](#)

In this dire situation, politics aside, who is it that can pull the Afghan pan out of the fire?

Three stakeholders have a direct responsibility. First and foremost, the Taliban regime. There is an expectation that the Taliban government would honour the commitments it made and take practical steps in that direction: form an inclusive government, respect human rights especially of women, and not allow Afghan soil to be used by any terrorist entity. If the Taliban government fails to meet the expectations of the regional and international community and adopts an uncompromising approach, the situation is likely to worsen. Conversely, if the Taliban government makes progress in meeting international expectations, the regional and international response could be more forthcoming.

The region around Afghanistan is one stakeholder that has much to gain from stability in Afghanistan and much more to lose if it descends into another bout of civil war. Efforts

are being made to evolve a regional consensus that the present Afghan government be supported in tandem with the Taliban honouring their commitments. Presently, however, a wait-and-see approach seems to be guiding the regional countries.

Then there is the international community — the UN, the US and Europe. While UN agencies like the World Food Programme are active all across Afghanistan, how the US responds is of critical value. There appears to be domestic politics inhibiting a supportive action by the US. On the other hand, if the Taliban government goes down, and terrorist entities sprout in Afghanistan, the world would be back to the pre-9/11 era. There is, therefore, an expectation that the US would play its part in stabilising Afghanistan, especially finding ways to unfreeze Afghan funds and facilitating help by international financial institutions.

What is the Muslim ummah doing amidst all this activity? Until now, one did not hear much. However, of late, the Saudis took the initiative, and Pakistan [offered to host the OIC meeting](#) in Islamabad on Dec 19. Bringing the Saudis, who host the headquarters of the OIC, on board was indeed important. Pakistan expects the event to focus on addressing the humanitarian crisis. It would be good to create a trust fund or some other special purpose vehicle to finance humanitarian relief. Charity and philanthropic organisations in the Muslim world should also be mobilised to provide assistance directly to the Afghans.

It is heartening that Pakistan has taken this timely initiative of mobilising the Muslim world. Importantly, the

government has made it clear that Pakistan is not speaking for the Afghan government. The latter can do that on its own. Pakistan's sole concern in hosting the meeting is to mobilise support for ordinary Afghans. That's a noble objective. Hoping that the Muslim world would make generous pledges of financial and in-kind support, the real test would be how urgently the Muslim ummah walks the talk.

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Published in Dawn, December 19th, 2021



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