The finance minister of Afghanistan in the new government of the Taliban (banned in Russia) has prepared a national budget which, for the first time in two decades, will be financed without foreign aid. This comes as the country becomes mired in an economic crisis and confronts an incipient humanitarian catastrophe, which the United Nations has called “an avalanche of hunger”. Ahmad Wali Haqmal, a spokesman for the finance minister, has not revealed the scope of the budget, which runs to December 2022.

Afghanistan’s global donors suspended financial aid when the Taliban seized power in August 2021, but the Western powers have also frozen access to billions of dollars of Afghan assets outside the country’s borders. It is well understood that these assets are not actually “frozen”, but being actively put to work in the economies of Western countries, above all the US, bringing them colossal dividends. If at some point Washington is compelled to return this money - which does not appear probable - it will be the original sum, without the dividends added to it by all-American know-how. That this is a brazen act of plunder would be perfectly apparent even without accounting for the current destitution of the Afghan people. One is reminded of the tremendous sum of dollars frozen by Washington back in 1979 after the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when the Americans fled from that country as they more recently fled Afghanistan.

The budget for the year 2021, prepared by the former government under the “wise guidance” of the IMF, projected a deficit regardless of the 219 billion Afghan dollars arriving in aid and grants and the further 217 billion dollars from internal revenues. At that time the rate of exchange stood at about 80 Afghan dollars to one US dollar, but the local currency has strongly depreciated since the return of the Taliban, especially in the most recent period, and now stands at 130 to the US dollar.
The Taliban inherited not only weak institutions but also a non-existent economy, and now an incipient humanitarian crisis. Consequently, the real test for the Taliban has only just begun: seizing power is one thing, but providing the exercise of that power with legitimacy and effectiveness is quite another. Every day Afghanistan draws nearer to a humanitarian crisis, and its economy is in free-fall due to the financial sanctions imposed in response to the Taliban takeover, which have paralysed the banking system and thus affected every facet of economic life. At a time when not one country has extended diplomatic recognition to their government, the Taliban are actively working with the international community, both through Doha and directly with the countries of the region. It would seem that at present the group may be seeking not recognition but collaboration (which amounts to a de-facto recognition) and humanitarian and financial aid. Although the provision of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan by several countries is an encouraging sign, it is insufficient to meet the vital needs of the Afghan population.

For precisely this reason, many analysts believe that in these difficult circumstances it is important that the international community make a co-ordinated effort to ensure that Afghanistan does not fall into a humanitarian catastrophe. If the Taliban cannot strengthen their position and establish some semblance of stability, there is a danger not only of the outbreak of civil war, but also that transnational terrorist elements will exploit the situation and fill the power-vacuum. Even at the time that the Taliban came to power in August 2021, there was a serious upswing in attacks by the Khorasan Province of Daesh (banned in Russia). The danger that Afghanistan may fall victim to transnational terrorist elements thus poses a threat equal to that of internal problems such as economic and humanitarian crises.

One must not forget that the Taliban arrived in power not by their own forces, but as a result of the Doha Agreement, which was made possible by the defeat of Al-Qaeda (banned in Russia) and had as a basic condition that the Taliban would not host any terrorist elements on their territory. However, refusing any constructive communication with the current Afghan government, withholding urgently needed economic aid and freezing their assets, leaves them in no position to strengthen and consolidate their exclusive control on that territory. It bears repeating once more that at this stage all these events and the important questions they raise must be viewed broadly, with a vision not limited to immediate political concerns. It is urgent that the international community abandons its current policy and ensures that the country does not dissolve by continuing to work with the Taliban and providing the necessary humanitarian and economic aid. Afghanistan should be viewed not as a regional problem, but rather as a collective global responsibility, demanding a co-ordinated and coherent approach.

In this regard the positive role being played by Pakistan is notable. The country is hosting an extraordinary session of the council of foreign ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation concerning the situation in Afghanistan: the first and largest multilateral international discussions of Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. Representatives of the fifty-seven member-states throughout the Muslim world, including Afghanistan, along with representatives of Russia and other countries, the World Bank, and the emergency aid organs of the United Nations met to seek a way out of Afghanistan’s current dire predicament. The general secretary of the OIC, Hissein Brahim Taha, called for a broadening of the role of the OIC mission in Kabul. The mission is to be provided with the financial, personnel, and material-technical resources to enable it to fulfil all its obligations in co-ordinating operations to provide humanitarian and development aid to Afghanistan. He also made an urgent appeal to the member-states of this influential international organization and other governments to provide humanitarian aid through the OIC mission in Kabul.

From the very beginning Pakistan was a staunch supporter of a peaceful resolution to the conflict through a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. Unfortunately, the international community under American leadership insisted on more than two decades of bloodshed and wasteful spending before recognizing the wisdom of this solution. More than that, Pakistan was at the forefront of the effort to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. On multiple occasions it called on the international community not to “abandon” the Afghan people, to provide humanitarian and economic aid and to participate in a political settlement to prevent the collapse of the Afghan state. For its part, besides the 3 million refugees it has already received, Islamabad is providing a constant stream of humanitarian aid and has committed itself to grant Afghanistan $28 million to this end.

Although the OIC meeting is an encouraging step in the right direction, much greater effort by the whole international community is needed to ensure that Afghanistan regains some semblance of stability and a functional economy. Moreover, instead of washing their hands of the matter, all those involved in the situation must meet their obligations and treat Afghanistan’s future as a collective responsibility. Here the burden rests primarily on the two main interest parties, the United States and the Taliban. After all, it was the brutal American invasion, conducted under a flimsy pretext, that brought Afghanistan into its present parlous state. If there were any justice in the world and if the norms of international law held sway, the American presidents responsible would stand trial for the crimes
they committed in the country. The US at large, meanwhile, would pay colossal compensation to help re-build the country and return it to its normal conditions. But as it is, while Iraq pays reparations to Kuwait the US enjoys the loot of the failed states it created in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

It bears emphasizing once more that the Taliban didn’t arrive in power out of nowhere, but as a result of a deal with the US, and as such Washington bears responsibility for fulfilling that agreement by guaranteeing that the Afghan state does not collapse. By the same token, now that the Taliban act as the de facto representatives of the Afghan people on the world stage, they must recognize that if they do not fulfil their own commitments to reform they will lose any chance for the support and recognition from the international community, and to an even greater extent from the countries of the immediate region, which they so sorely need to legitimize their government. For just this reason one can only hope that common sense will prevail among the Taliban and they will focus their efforts on creating a future political structure which will be inclusive, responsible, and accountable and, above all, which will serve the Afghan people. They ought not to forget that this is the 21st century.

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