

# Scenario 240

## HUMAN CRISIS IN NEW AFGHANISTAN

**On 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021:** The Taliban took over the reins of Afghanistan again after 20 years. They brought back their state-name as *Islamic Emirates of AFGHANISTAN*; later announced their interim cabinet but the turmoil was not over. The real-time test for the Taliban group started because, as happens in every new set-up, the group faced a massive and immediate trial in a desperately poor and diplomatically isolated country where deep-seated political and social problems had been compounded by more than four decades of war; on both counts – internally; the civil war – and externally; from Soviet and American occupations.

### HOW RICH THE TALIBAN WERE?

Referring to BBC's article at world-46554097 [BBC Reality Check] dated 28<sup>th</sup> August 2021:

*"Despite the 20-year conflict during 2001-21 with deaths of tens of thousands of Taliban fighters, the group's territorial control and military strength had been increased. By mid-2021 they had estimated 70,000-100,000 fighters, up from around 30,000 in 2011.*

*The group's annual income from 2011 onwards **has now been estimated at around \$400m (£2E0m)** by the United Nations (UN). But by the end of 2018 this may have increased significantly, to as much as \$1.5bn a year, according to BBC investigations."*

The Taliban got developed a number of income sources; for instance:

**Foreign Donations:** The US officials remained angry with certain countries - including Pakistan, Iran and Russia - for giving financial aid to the Taliban but the said countries always denied. However, private citizens from Pakistan and several Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates [UAE] and Qatar were considered to be the largest individual contributors - according to experts it could be as \$500m a year. A classified US intelligence report estimated that in 2008

the Taliban received \$106m from foreign sources, in particular from the Gulf States.

**Drug Trade:** The US and the West unnecessarily blame that the Taliban were involved in the illegal drug trade. It's not true as far as the organisational character is concerned; the Taliban never argued such remarks.

***Rather the Taliban take pride in having banned opium poppy cultivation for the period they remained in power during 1EES-2001.***

Afghanistan has been the world's largest producer of opium – and thus its derivative named heroin – but the Afghan people hold that during the foreign occupation the opium & drug trade was secretly done by some of the US and NATO security contractors and their sponsored warlords. With an estimated annual export value of \$1.5-\$3bn; opium has been a big business for contractors. Opium harvesting provided almost 120,000 jobs in Afghanistan in 2019, according to the UN data. A 10% cultivation tax was being collected from opium farmers – but that was done by regular Afghan government officials – not the Taliban.

A point to ponder is that during past 20 years the Taliban were hiding themselves in hilly terrains of Afghanistan with their guns and arsenal; always thinking about saving their lives OR planning to launch an ambush over the foreign forces – then ***how could they involve in opium cultivation*** and what area was with them for cultivation or how could they collect taxes; all seems to be a joke.

Taxes were collected from the laboratories converting opium into heroin, as well as the traders who used to smuggle the illicit drugs – but the collectors were Hamid Karzai and then Ashraf Ghani – NOT the Taliban. US Commander **Gen John Nicholson's** conclusion in 2018's **SIGAR Report** was false and fabricated – trying to cover his colleagues and soldiers.

However, it can be understood that the Taliban might have asked the general Afghan traders to pay taxes on various goods like fuel and construction material - when travelling through areas they controlled. That's a normal routine even in settled countries. The Taliban might also have taxed supply-trucks, transport, development and infrastructure projects - including roads, schools, and clinics – which were mostly funded by the West but that, could happen in any part of the world as per routine local tax laws.

**Mines & Minerals:** Afghanistan is rich in minerals and precious stones, much of it under-exploited as a result of the years of conflict. The mining industry in Afghanistan is worth an estimated \$1bn annually; most of the extraction is small scale and much of it is done illegally. The Taliban could have taken control of mining sites for their income because their operations were, of course, launched from hills and mountains.

In its 2014's Annual Report, the ***UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*** said the Taliban received about \$10m a year from 25 to 30 illegal mining operations in southern *Helmand* province – which has been the Taliban base since its first day in being – 1994-95.

The Taliban gained control of Kabul on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021 and NEXT DAY [16<sup>th</sup> August 2021], the Biden administration froze Afghan government reserves held in US bank accounts, blocking the Taliban from accessing billions of dollars held in American banks and financial establishments. Referring to news by **Jeff Stein** on media dated 17<sup>th</sup> August 2021:

*"The decision was made by Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Office of Foreign Assets Control. The State Department was also involved in discussions over the weekend, with officials in the White House monitoring the developments; they made out a statement: Any Central Bank assets the Afghan government have in the United States will not be made available to the Taliban."*

This government policy was not made public then. Afghanistan was already one of the poorest countries in the world and was highly dependent on American aid that was pushed into danger zone. The Biden administration was facing hard choices over how to manage existing sanctions on the Taliban, which made it difficult to deliver international humanitarian assistance to a population facing ruin and devastation.

The Taliban was last in power from 1996 to 2001 and had returned to office after twenty years. With the group taking over again, situation could be termed as '***humanitarian crisis in the making.***' President Biden in his speech, on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2021, appeared to commit to continuing to give aid to Afghanistan, saying: '***We will continue to support the Afghan people. We will lead with our diplomacy, our international influence and our humanitarian aid.***'

However, nothing was seen on ground action till ending 2021 at least.

The IMF told that Afghanistan Central Bank held \$9.4 billion in reserve assets as of April 2021 which comes up roughly as one-third of the

country's annual economic output; but majority of those reserves was not held in Afghanistan. Among those, billions of dollars were kept in the US. No one in White House and Treasury was clear about the future policy for the US economic assistance to Afghanistan.

The US did not need any new authority to freeze the said reserves, because the Taliban was already facing sanctions under an executive order approved after the 9/11 [2001] attacks. Beyond the reserves, the US used to send roughly \$3 billion per year in support for the Afghan military. The funding could only be spent *if the Secretary of Defence certifies to Congress that the Afghan forces are controlled by a civilian representative government that is committed to protecting human rights and women's rights.*

About 80% of Afghanistan's budget was funded by the US and other international donors. However, the fiscal gurus in Washington held that blocking the funds meant for the poor Afghan people would be dangerous. There should be no restrictions on the Afghan economy. The Chief of Eurasia Group held that: ***'You'll see a lot more refugees on the back of this, a lot more radicalism on the back of this.'***

**Mark Weisbrot**, co-director of the Centre for Economic and Policy Research, a Washington think tank, said:

*"For the US government to seize Afghanistan's central bank reserves would be a big mistake. It would be telling the Taliban that the US government wants to destroy them and their country's economy – (as a revenge of shameful defeat).*

*This is far from the first time the US had cut off foreign governments from its assets, approving **similar moves against Venezuela and Libya** after leaders hostile to Washington had gained power in those countries as well."*

**Smith**, the former Obama administration official, said this important decision probably should come when Washington would decide how to handle sanctions against the Taliban. Maintaining those sanctions might chill international efforts to help Afghanistan, but it could prove politically impossible for the Biden administration to moderate — let alone lift — sanctions on the Taliban in power.

International aid flows represented roughly 43% of Afghanistan's economy in 2020, according to the World Bank.

*"It could be cataclysmic for Afghanistan if the administration does 1 not handle the sanctions issue deftly - pointing to a similar situation 2 in the waning days of the Trump presidency that threatened to deprive 3 Yemenis living under the sanctioned **Houthi government** from aid. 4 In that case, Biden officials removed the Houthis from the terrorism 5 sanctions list — an option that could be unavailable in this (Taliban's) 6 case."*

However, in Afghanistan, it's potentially a serious humanitarian issue that the Biden government would be thinking hard about. The US and the UN both hold the statistics that half of Afghanistan's population required humanitarian assistance in 2021, a six-fold increase from four years ago.

NATO Secretary General **Jens Stoltenberg** said at a news conference on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2021 that NATO got suspended aid to the Afghan government as well. They suspended all financial and other kinds of support to the Afghan government, because NATO would not support the Taliban regime. **"No money is transferred; no support is provided,"** held the Secretary General NATO.

Suggestion were made immediately after the Taliban's take-over by Britain's foreign minister that '*international powers may also entertain new sanctions against Afghanistan*'. Daniel Glaser, former Assistant Secretary for terrorist financing, said that cutting Afghanistan off from the reserve funds would be the obvious first move. It's the least they could do; the Taliban would not be the responsible custodians of Afghanistan's reserves.

### **CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR THE TALIBAN:**

Referring to an analysis available on most media pages like **daily DAWN** of 31st October 2021: There were numerous challenges facing the Afghan Taliban namely -

**Lack of trust:** Once there was widespread suspicion about the Taliban among Afghans about their thinking about concept of Islamic government. The poles apart Islamic groups had their own different reasons – but mostly subsided later. Last time when the Taliban were in power from 1996 to 2001, they imposed a harsh interpretation of Islamic law. Members of the ruling group walking past a beauty salon with images of women used to deface the images using spray paint. In their last stint, they banned women from education and public spaces, brutally executed

political opponents and massacred religious and ethnic minorities such as the *Hazaras*.

However, this time, the Taliban promised a softer system around, including rights for women. The Taliban also thought about an inclusive government, holding talks with a variety of movers and shakers in Afghan politics — but excluding former US-backed President Hamid Karzai and his cabinet members. They sent representatives to the *Shia Hazara* minority, which had suffered brutal violence at the hands of the Taliban in the 1990s.

There was a relief in many parts of rural Afghanistan where people wanted an end to the violence; many Afghans said they were happy with such initial actions by the Taliban but still to see continuity in policy. Women, particularly in cities, remained fearful of stepping outside.

There was one pocket of armed resistance in the *Panjshir valley*, a traditional anti-Taliban stronghold fortress of late Ahmed Shah Masoud's group – but soon it subsided due to effective negotiations between new leadership of Taliban and the Northern Alliance. First time, the Taliban were seen NOT using war-path to show their might.

**Economic, humanitarian catastrophe:** Afghanistan was, and has been one of the poorest nations in the world. After the Taliban were toppled in 2001, huge amounts of foreign aid flowed into the country. International assistance was more than 40% of Afghan GDP in 2020; most of it stood suspended in 2021, with no guarantees about the rest.

This crunch immediately started spelling disaster, as the Taliban needed to figure out how to pay government employees and keep running critical infrastructures such as water, power and communications. The Taliban's requests to the US to release their own funds in American banks were repeatedly turned down. The UN also warned of a humanitarian catastrophe, with food stocks running low because of disruptions caused by conflict as well as a severe drought.

Western media alleged that '*insurgents (the Taliban) had large revenues — hundreds of millions of dollars*' but it was all fake estimations; it could be a tiny amount compared with Afghanistan's national requirements. The Taliban started tapping state sources of income after taking over Afghanistan afresh in August 2021, such as customs revenue from border crossings, but that too was a fraction of national needs. No Income Tax was possible as there was no business in Afghanistan;

most shops in rural districts were drone attacked by the US-Army at various times.

**HEALTH CARE CRISIS:** When the Taliban re-occupied the throne in Kabul [2021], the health care system in Afghanistan was on the brink of collapse, international aid groups had warned about threats of deepening the country's humanitarian crisis with the start of winter. Thousands of health care facilities had run out of essential medicines. Afghan doctors were not paid since months, with no pay-cheques in sight. During ending the US exit plan, there was a surge of cases of measles and diarrhoea, according to the World Health Organization [WHO].

Since two decades, aid from the World Bank and other international donors handled the country's health care system, but after the Taliban seized power, they froze \$600 million in health care aid. Within the first month of the Taliban rule, the toll was becoming clear. **Jim Huylebroek and Christina** published their article on media of 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021:

*"We are deeply concerned that Afghanistan faces imminent collapse of health services and worsening hunger if aid and money do not flow into the country within weeks. Afghanistan's looming harsh winter threatens greater misery and hardships."*

The unfolding health care crisis needed aid for the country – for the people – for the human being – no wonder it's under Taliban rule. Foreign aid once made up nearly 75% of the country's public expenditures, according to the World Bank, but after the Taliban seized control on 15<sup>th</sup> August, the US had frozen over \$9 billion in the Afghan Central Bank's American accounts, and major international funders like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund [IMF] paused disbursements.

They feared that the Taliban would re-impose the brutal repression of their first reign [1996 to 2001]; Aid groups and foreign governments talked of finding a way to funnel money and supplies into Afghanistan without placing them in Taliban hands, but until then, ordinary Afghans would be constantly paying a heavy price. The consensus remained that:

*"There needs to be some solution to the financial aid flows into Afghanistan to ensure that at least salaries can be paid, and that essential supplies — power and water being two of them — can be procured."*

1 However, no funds were allocated by any country or donor agency. During  
2 first week of October 2021, the US cleared the way for some aid to flow  
3 to Afghanistan, issuing two general licenses to allow Washington and  
4 certain international organizations like the UN to engage with the Taliban  
5 to provide humanitarian assistance – but red tapism was there to put  
6 hurdles as per routine. Immediate need was to ease the flow of agricultural  
7 goods, medicines and other critical resources. **Andrea Gacki**, Director of  
8 the US Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, said in a statement:

9  
10 *“Treasury is committed to facilitating the flow of humanitarian*  
11 *assistance to the people of Afghanistan and other activities that support*  
12 *their basic human needs.”*  
13

14 Over the past 20 years, significant health gains were made in Afghanistan  
15 in reducing maternal and child mortality, to end polio and more. Those  
16 gains became at severe risk; the WHO was worried more. The  
17 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Society was  
18 looking for \$38 million to fund health care and other emergency services  
19 on immediate basis across Afghanistan - but that appeal could raise only  
20 22% funds. The international community remained deeply divided over  
21 the issue of providing aid to the Taliban-run government.

22  
23 Some countries and aid organizations demanded that the new government  
24 should meet certain conditions — ***like guaranteeing women’s rights*** — in  
25 return for aid. Others warned that making aid conditional risks plunging  
26 the country into a humanitarian disaster.

27  
28 More than half a million Afghans were driven from their homes during  
29 the Taliban’s four-month military campaign in summer 2021, and many  
30 of them were seen living in make-shift camps. A drought enveloped  
31 much of the country which caused a dire food shortage. Around  
32 18 million Afghans, almost half of the Afghanistan’s population, were in  
33 urgent need of food and humanitarian assistance.

34  
35 In October 2021; the World Health Organization [WHO] warned that  
36 two-thirds of the roughly 2,300 health care facilities it supported had  
37 run out of essential medicines. Only about 400 were functioning then.  
38 Those facilities, the backbone of the country’s health care system, were  
39 part of a \$600 million project administered by the World Bank and  
40 funded by the US.

41  
42 Over 2,500 health facilities installed elsewhere were no longer working,  
43 too. More than 20,000 health workers were out of work, either because



the facilities were closed or their salaries were frozen. That stoked fears 1  
about a surge in deaths from basic medical ailments, and of a crippling 2 brain  
drain as doctors look for work elsewhere or leave the country. One 3 Dr  
Farid Rasouli, working in the anaesthesia ward at Aliabad Hospital 4 in  
Kabul, said: 5

*"Our doctors have not received their salaries for three months now. 7  
The hospital's medical staffs have been reporting to work each day but 8  
if we don't receive our salaries, there is a possibility we will leave our 9  
duties."* 10

Afghans across the country were feeling the pressure. Hundreds of 12  
people moved to the refugee settlement from the South since months 13  
before, when fighting between the Taliban and the previous government's 14  
forces intensified across southern Afghanistan. For weeks, Helmand's 15  
capital Lashkar Gah, was pummelled by air-strikes from the US and 16  
Ghani regim's forces and running battles between Taliban fighters and 17  
Afghan troops. 18

Hundreds of houses were destroyed and the Taliban instructed residents 20  
to leave the city. Many others in the resettlement camps couldn't find 21  
work, and they were struggling to buy basic goods as prices surged. 22  
People all over Afghanistan were facing famine, especially the refugees 23  
that were living in the camps. People there didn't have the money even 24  
to buy bread. 25

**Brain drain:** Beyond the cash crunch, the Taliban faced another critical 27  
shortage - skilled Afghans. As US-led forces gradually withdrew and the 28  
previous two national governments purposefully lost control; thus 29  
most Afghans with skills, experience and resources headed for exits 30  
from the country. They included bureaucrats, bankers, doctors, engineers, 31  
professors and university graduates thinking that they would face 32  
problems in the new government of the Taliban due to rising financial 33  
crunch. 34

The Taliban appeared aware of the impact such a brain drain could have 36  
on the Afghan economy. Their spokesman urged skilled Afghans not 37  
to leave, saying the country needed experts especially the doctors and 38  
engineers. 39

**Diplomatic isolation:** The Taliban's first regime was largely 'an outsider 41  
– a new class of revolutionaries' on the global stage. This time, they were 42  
seen keen on wide international recognition, even as most nations had 43

suspended or closed their diplomatic missions in Kabul. The group contacted regional powers such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China, as well as Qatar — which had previously hosted the Taliban's political activity for years - but none recognised the new regime till ending 2021 at least.

However, Moscow and Beijing did not use their veto option in the UN after language related to the Taliban was softened.

**IS Terror threat:** The Taliban took control of Afghanistan but the threat of terror attacks in the country still prevailed; their rival, the militant Islamic State group [IS], carried out a deadly suicide attack in Kabul, killing more than 100 people on 27<sup>th</sup> August 2021 at the airport during the evacuation operation. The Taliban and IS were considered both hard-line extremists before the American exit, but the latter has an even harsher and brutal interpretation of Islamic law. IS said it would continue to fight in Afghanistan, and its statements described the Taliban as *apostates*.

#### **SUMMITS AT ROME & THE UN:**

This time the Taliban exhibited a ***sharp role reversal***: They defended the Afghan people from the attacks from their own fighters as well as the foreign forces – but they were paralysed by starvation, hunger and famine at large scale. Referring to the daily '**NATION**' dated 27<sup>th</sup> September 2021:

*"There were encouraging discussions in media as Afghanistan had a lot to offer under heads of the connectivity framework for the region – especially if seen in the back-drop of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor [CPEC] infrastructure. However, this was a long-term endeavour requiring a lot of planning.*

*The more pressing concern was the **humanitarian crisis** and **economic collapse** that could become a very real possibility given the ongoing situation in Afghanistan."*

While the US Treasury Department issued licenses to facilitate humanitarian aid and financial assistance to Afghanistan, a lot more needed to be done considering how the country's assets and reserves could remain frozen.

Another prerequisite to be achieved before grand visions of connectivity was the realisation of security and stability. Given the presence of

militant groups like the TTP and ISIS on Afghan soil, it was imperative 1 that safe havens for such outfits be eliminated at the earliest as they 2 would continue to imperil the stability of Afghanistan, Pakistan and 3 other neighbouring countries. Restoring stability in Afghanistan could 4 bring far reaching positive implications for the region and its connectivity 5 infrastructure. There were several stalled projects like the CASA-1000 6 power project and TAPI pipeline that could be resumed once the security 7 situation improved. 8

**Chico Harlan's** essay of 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021 in the Washington Post told 10 the world that: 11

*"With Afghanistan cut off from most of its foreign support and 13 plunging into an **economic and humanitarian crisis**, the European 14 Union pledged a major \$1.15 billion aid package during a virtual 15 Group of 20 summit, calling it a step to avoid catastrophe."* 16

But for all of Europe's urgency — part of it was driven by anxiety about 18 **spill-over migration** — other nations, representing the largest economies, 19 did not step forward with comparable measures. 20

The summit — in which President Biden participated, but Chinese 22 President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin did not — 23 ended with a general agreement about the importance of providing a 24 lifeline to Afghanistan's people as conditions were worsening day by day. 25 European Commission President of the EU Ursula von der Leyen said in 26 a statement: 27

*"We must do all we can to avert a major humanitarian and socio- 29 economic collapse in Afghanistan."* 30

The European pledge was significant; the sum was well beyond what 32 countries had been offering annually in humanitarian support even before 33 the Taliban takeover. Since 2002, the US had given Afghanistan a total of 34 only \$3.9 billion in humanitarian assistance, according to USAID. But the 35 current money was nowhere near enough to offset the distress. 36

Until the Taliban takeover in August [2021], Afghanistan had survived 38 on international aid. That inflow was halted as nations cut diplomatic 39 ties. At a UN donor conference a month before, the US had offered a 40 relatively small funding \$64 million in aid; while Italian Prime Minister 41 Mario Draghi seemed to suggest a new US commitment of \$300 million. 42 The US was committed to work closely with the international community 43

1 and using diplomatic, humanitarian, and economic means to address the  
2 situation in Afghanistan and support the Afghan people.

3  
4 According to the White House summary, the leaders discussed the  
5 'critical need to maintain a laser-focus on enduring counter-terrorism  
6 efforts' as well as ensuring safe passage for those seeking to leave the  
7 country. Across Kabul, evidence of Afghanistan's fast-unravelling  
8 economy under the Taliban was felt everywhere. The participants also  
9 reaffirmed their commitment to provide humanitarian assistance straight  
10 to the Afghan people through international organizations rather than via  
11 the new government - the White House affirmed.

12  
13 Countries in the G-20 were fairly aligned in how they would handle  
14 the new Taliban leaders: So far, none had officially recognized their  
15 government. But they could diverge on some of the more pinching issues,  
16 including what preconditions to set for diplomatic recognition and when  
17 to resume developmental aid that would be given directly to the Taliban  
18 to help the country beyond the immediate crisis. Putting simply, the West  
19 was going to put more preconditions in place for recognition including  
20 progress in women's rights issues.

21  
22 A summary of the meeting released in Italy, mentioned the importance  
23 of preserving access to **education for Afghan children** — girls and  
24 boys — and said the rights of women and minorities must be respected.  
25 The Taliban were to be judged on their deeds. While the acting foreign  
26 minister for the Taliban, Amir Khan Muttaqi, insisted during a  
27 conference in Doha during the same days that:

28  
29 *"The international community needs to start cooperating with us, so*  
30 *that insecurity in the country could be addressed."*

31  
32 Mr Muttaqi, however, didn't commit to restart secondary education for  
33 girls, which had been halted in August by the Taliban – an alarming issue  
34 for the whole world, not only the EU and donor agencies. Italy's Draghi  
35 had expressed disappointment while adding that:

36  
37 *"Right now there isn't any progress that we can see. It was said that*  
38 *the government would be inclusive; it is not inclusive. It was said the*  
39 *government would be representing various ethnic minorities, and*  
40 *gender-wise. It does not.*

41  
42 *The European Union still needed the Taliban to meet certain*  
43 *benchmarks before overall development aid — rather than this*

*one-time sum — would be unfrozen. But the Afghan people should not pay the price of the Taliban's actions thus the aid is essential to avoid humanitarian disaster and prevent **'uncontrolled migrant flows from Afghanistan'** to regional countries and beyond."*

The EU aid package, some \$350 million of which had already been earmarked, included funding that would be directed to Afghanistan's neighbours to *'enhance security'*. Aiding groups were warned of a pending humanitarian crisis that was grave even by the standards of a 20-year war. The economy was stalled; banks closed; the primary health-care system was on the brink of collapse. The World Food Program said a week earlier that just **5% of households were consuming enough food**. More than a million children could face acute malnutrition.

UN Secretary General António Guterres took it as a **'make-or-break moment'** in the country and warned of a heavy price if other nations didn't help Afghanistan. Draghi — famous for his role as a central banker in preserving the euro — said that:

*"It is crucial to ensure that the banking system in Afghanistan doesn't collapse. If the banks collapse entirely, it would be very difficult to continue providing humanitarian assistance. It is very hard to see how you can help people in Afghanistan without involving the Taliban..... but that does not mean recognizing them."*

A senior Biden admin official said in that meeting at Rome that:

*"....while not officially recognizing the government there, the United States has an interest in counterterrorism, in ensuring a safe exit for Americans and others who want to leave and in providing humanitarian aid. We are going to have to engage with the Taliban."*

Looming economic crisis overshadowed Afghan-talks at the UN, too. Afghans bury paintings and hide books out of fear of Taliban crackdown on arts and culture. As evacuation airlifts ended, the whole West got worried about those left behind in Afghanistan to face dire humanitarian crises along with Afghans.

### **UN URGED THE EU & THE US FOR HELP:**

**On 17<sup>th</sup> November 2021;** Afghanistan's Taliban rulers sent an open letter to the US Congress, urging American lawmakers to help unfreeze their country's assets seized after their August takeover of Kabul. In the letter,

Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi warned of a mass refugee exodus from Afghanistan unless the US unblocks the frozen assets and ends other financial sanctions against the country. Mr Muttaqi wrote that the Taliban were making this request to ensure that:

*“..... the doors for future relations are opened, assets of Afghanistan’s Central Bank are unfrozen and sanctions on our banks are lifted.”*

**{BACKGROUND NOTE:** The Biden administration had frozen \$9 plus billion of assets belonging to the Afghan Central Bank soon after the Taliban captured Kabul on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021 and imposed other economic sanctions on the new regime as well. America’s Western allies also imposed similar sanctions.

The World Bank [WB] and International Monetary Fund [IMF] also had suspended about \$1.2 billion in aid that they were supposed to release for Afghanistan in 2021. The sanctions were part of a US-led effort to persuade the militants to include non-Taliban elements in the government and protect the achievements of the last twenty years, including education for women and religious freedom for minorities.}

Washington didn’t recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government in Afghanistan and a week earlier the White House had announced that Qatar would serve as its diplomatic representative in the country. Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo told a US Senate committee:

*“...Apparently there is no situation where Washington would allow the Taliban to access the Afghan Central Bank reserves. It’s essential that we maintain our sanctions against the Taliban but at the same time find ways for legitimate humanitarian assistance to get to the Afghan people;”* daily **DAWN** dated 18<sup>th</sup> November 2021 is referred.

The Taliban’s letter, however, reminded the US lawmakers that financial insecurity was the biggest challenge Afghanistan was facing and *‘the roots of this concern lead back to the freezing of assets of our people by the American government’*.

Afghan Foreign Minister wrote that the sanctions had not only played havoc with trade and business but also with humanitarian aid to millions of desperate Afghans; adding that:

*“We are concerned that if the current situation prevails, the Afghan government and people will face problems and will become a cause for mass migration in the region and the world.*

*We hope that the members of the American Congress will think thoroughly in this regard and the American officials will view from [the] prism of justice the problems of our people arising from sanctions and unjust partisan treatment. The lawmakers are also advised not to approach this humanitarian issue in a superficial way."*

During early November 2021, the UN World Food Program had warned that years of conflict, and a prolonged drought were threatening more than half of the country's estimated 38 million people with starvation in coming winter. ***The letter also assured the US Congress that Kabul's Taliban rulers intend to do things differently this time.*** Practical steps were being taken towards good governance, security and transparency; Mr Muttaqi assured:

***"No threat is posed to the region or the world from Afghanistan and a pathway has been paved for positive cooperation. Afghans now understand the concerns of the international community but that it was necessary for all sides to take positive steps to build trust. Not lifting the sanctions would further damage the US reputation in Afghanistan and this will serve as the worst memory ingrained in Afghans at the hands of America."***

The UN's special representative for the country warned on the same day that ***'Afghanistan is on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe and its collapsing economy is heightening the risk of extremism.'***

Hunger forced Afghans to sell their young daughters into marriage because of that humanitarian catastrophe. It was preventable; the main cause was financial sanctions on the Taliban. Sanctions paralysed the banking system, affecting every aspect of the economy. Afghanistan was also slated to access about \$450m on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2021 from the IMF on the pre-text of ***'lack of clarity about a new government'***.

The UN spokesperson [Lyons] said the paralysis of the banking sector would push the financial system into unaccountable and unregulated informal money exchanges. That, she said, ***'can only help facilitate terrorism, trafficking and further drug smuggling'*** that would first affect Afghanistan and then infect the whole region. A major negative development was the Taliban's inability to stem the expansion of the militant Islamic State [IS] group, which had expanded itself in nearly all provinces and was increasingly active. The number of attacks attributed to IS had increased significantly from 60 in 2020 to 334 this year of 2021 till then.

UN's Lyons had further urged the international community:

*".....to find ways to provide financial support to the Afghan people, who were 'abandoned, forgotten and indeed punished by circumstances that were not their fault. We must focus for the next three or four months on helping the most vulnerable Afghans during the coming winter [of 2021]."*

*The international community needs urgently to find a way to provide financial support to health care workers in state hospitals, staff in food security programmes, and, yes, eventually to teachers provided that girls right to education is emphatically met."*

On behalf of the UN, Lyons assured council members that the UN would make every effort to ensure that funds would not be diverted to the Taliban — or by the Taliban. China and Russia also urged the unfreezing of Afghanistan's reserves but the US deputy ambassador Jeffrey made no mention of any solution except the lip service that the Afghan people should not have to pay twice for the Taliban decision.

The Taliban government was not being recognised by any country or the United Nations. Afghanistan's UN seat was still held by the representative of the previous government, Ambassador Ghulam Isaczai. Isaczai also told the council that:

*"Afghanistan is facing 'a crisis of historic proportions'. The life and dignity of millions of Afghans are threatened by a failing economy, severe food shortage and absence of security, basic rights and freedom. If the current trends continued, Afghanistan will experience near-universal poverty."*

Now see an article appeared in the **AP News** dated 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021 which painted a very pathetic picture of the country after America's exit:

*"Afghanistan's health care system is on the brink of collapse and to function only with a lifeline from aid organisations. The diesel fuel needed to produce oxygen for corona-virus patients has run out. So have supplies of dozens of essential drugs. The staff, unpaid for months, still shows up for work, but they are struggling to make ends meet at home - this is the plight at the **Afghan-Japan Hospital** for communicable diseases, the only COVID-19 facility for the more than 4 million people who live in the capital of Kabul - a symptom of an extreme crisis ahead."*



Dr Ahmad Fatah of one hospital said that the doctors and nurses were 1 facing many problems here referring to three months of unpaid salaries, 2 shortages of equipment and drugs, and lack of food..... Some of the 3 staffs were seen in such financial difficulties that they opted to sell their 4 household furniture to make ends meet.

Oxygen remained a big issue for them because they were unable to run the generators - the hospital's production plant was silent since months because the admin couldn't afford the diesel. And doctors were bracing for more infections in coming days of Omicron variant. Dr Shereen Agha, the 38-year-old head of the hospital's Intensive Care Unit told:

*"Without outside help, we are not ready for omicron. A disaster will be here. The hospital is short even of basic supplies like examination gloves, and its two ambulances sit idle for lack of fuel."*

The previous government had contracted with a Netherlands-based aid group, **HealthNet TPO**, to run the hospital. But the contract expired in November [2021] and was financed under a fund managed by the World Bank, which like most of the international community had frozen their payments to the new Taliban government. The Dutch firm's Program Manager **Willem Reussing** said:

*"The organization is in negotiations to secure funding but the donor community is very reluctant to continue support and has strict conditions. The WHO and UNICEF are only managing to maintain minimal services and do not cover the corona-virus response. The health care system ... is really on the brink of collapsing; the Afghanistan Japan Hospital is a dire example - begging everyone to step in and save lives."*

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August amid a chaotic US and NATO troops withdrawal, the international community pulled all funding. For a country heavily dependent on foreign aid, the consequences were devastating. The economy was deeply troubled under the previous government, with state employees often going unpaid. Last year, almost half the population was living below the poverty line, with the situation made worse by the pandemic and a drought that affected the basic price structures even.

The Taliban government wanted the international community, especially the US and the European Forums to ease sanctions and release Afghanistan's assets abroad so it could pay civil servants, including

doctors and teachers. ***The United Nations also sounded the alarm over a hunger crisis, with 22% of Afghanistan's 38 million people near famine and another 35% facing acute food insecurity.***

**Indira Gandhi Children Hospital's** wards remained the worst example of inhuman treatment by the global organisations where anxious mothers sit by emaciated children waiting for medicines and food. The mothers were seen sleeping in the hospital for six - six nights or more. One mother wept while saying:

*"I don't even have money to change his diapers. Her husband, a tailor, lost both legs in a roadside bomb several years ago, and has trouble sitting up. Work is hard to come by, and Parwana said her father and brothers are helping the family of three to survive."*

In the next bed, 1½-year-old Talwasa lying covered in blankets. Only her eyes moved behind half-closed eyelids. Her mother, Noor Bibi, who had six other children, said:

*"We are in a very bad situation. Her husband can't find work; we only eat dried bread and can't find food for weeks and weeks."*

Deputy Health Minister Dr Abdul Bari Omar told in early December that Afghanistan had 3.5 million malnourished children, although he noted that the data was from the previous government. Dr Bari added that:

*"It didn't happen in the last four months. Malnutrition was inherited from the previous system, but we are trying to find a solution for this problem. The former admin also had failed to resolve shortages of medical equipment. They had seen 3,000 malnutrition cases in the last four months. Of those, 250 were hospitalized and the rest were treated at home."*

Hospital workers also were struggling with shortages; they unanimously held that:

*"We are loyal to our homeland and our profession. That's why we still continue our jobs and provide services to our patients. They have gone without salaries for five months. The hospital also is running low on drug supplies, including special food supplements for malnutrition, as well as antibiotics, analgesics and anaesthetics. Some supplies had come in from aid agencies, but just peanuts."*

Similar situation was prevailing in the National Hospital, where supplies <sup>1</sup> were running low. As with most of the other state-run hospitals, its <sup>2</sup> patients must buy their own drugs, with staff only dipping into <sup>3</sup> emergency supplies for those who truly were not able to afford it. <sup>4</sup> Sometimes doctors were forced to give smaller doses of drugs because <sup>5</sup> they simply didn't have enough for the patients. <sup>6</sup>