



AFGHANISTAN:

Convalescing the
Socio-Political Fabric



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BY

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PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES
FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT
RESOLUTION FROM THE
NEIGHBOURHOOD

AFGHANISTAN: Convalescening the Socio-Political Fabric

Recovering from the ruins of more than three decades of conflict, Afghanistan today stands at the crossroads seeking desperate measures to rediscover its identity primarily through the precepts of nation-building and strengthening of state structures. The need for Afghanistan to address nation-building arises more so with the aim of devising a more inclusive approach towards integrating all factions of its population—which remain heavily fractured and segmented at present, thus impacting upon the overall development policy of the nation. The ethnic fabric of the Afghan society is so diverse that people seem to have lost connect with the concept of nationhood and national integration and seek identity in the name of an ethnic grouping or a tribe, most of which are under-represented in the political and bureaucratic elite. This consequently puts an ominous question mark on the very basics of a nation's national identity.

Caught in the clutches of competition between select political elites excluding any competition or voice originating from the mass base, Afghanistan's political fabric reflects domination by traditionally feudal and tribal power structures. With the state's structural apparatus thus steadily deteriorating, it could lead to a chronic decay of its democratic system and values. That

notwithstanding, even the socio-political fabric of Afghanistan is fast waning. The worst fallout of an all out erosion of a state's social (and socio-political) fabric would be civil war—which would be disastrous particularly when the world has invested so much in the past decade to keep the nation afloat and made positive efforts towards reconstruction of Afghanistan. Further, polarisation of the Afghan society along ethnic/tribal lines would plunge not just Afghanistan but the entire region into murkier gloom. Fortifying the pillars of social democracy is a demanding long-term task which seeks mass participation and improved transparency with an objective of cementing the democratic foundations of a nation-state.

Addressing the disparities in the manner in which men and women are treated in the Afghan society continue to be damaging, thus questioning the future of social justice in Afghanistan. For any nation to redefine and thereafter fine-tune its socio-political framework, enhancing women's rights and opportunities is a subject that needs to be mainstreamed. Introduction and promotion of mechanisms to achieve gender equality in Afghanistan's social, economic, and political life needs corrective consideration.

As Afghanistan nears the 2014 deadline of

withdrawal of international troops, the caution that any potential political settlement must be both Afghan-owned and Afghan-led should not be disregarded in any way. The future of Afghanistan is intertwined with the future of the region. A secure Afghanistan is crucial to establishing a secure region taking into account facets including transitioning while maintaining political stability, security, peace and economic development. The conduct of Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2015 in an inclusive and transparent manner with a mandate of improved levels of governance will be defining moments for the future trajectory that Afghanistan will take as a nation-state.

An important component to all this would be the undertaking of coherent and tangible measures to reduce the demand and countering the production, processing and trafficking of illicit drugs and precursor chemicals. According to its Annual Report of 2013 on Afghanistan, UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) says that opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan reached a record high with area planted with poppy rising by 36 per cent in 2013, as farmers seek to “insure” themselves before NATO forces withdraw in 2014.

The apprehension that departure of a substantial number of US-led NATO troops by the end of

2014 may throw the war-torn nation into further chaos seems to have driven the farmers to increase poppy cultivation in order to shore up their assets as insurance against an undecided future. Most of this cultivation takes place in the southern and western provinces of Afghanistan. In Helmand, where the Taliban are most active, is the main poppy-producing region where the area under cultivation rose by a third in 2013; and neighbouring Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban, saw a 16 per cent rise. These statistics signify connections between funding insurgency through the illicit narco-arms trading web against the Afghan government structures and the NATO-led ISAF forces. Poppy farmers are taxed by the Taliban who use the cash to help fund their insurgency against the government and NATO forces. According to the acting Afghan counter-narcotics minister, Din Mohammad Mubarez Rashidi, “More than half of the opium cultivation takes place in Helmand... Taliban and Al-Qaeda encourage farmers to cultivate and protect their crops.” Given that Afghanistan produces approximately 90 per cent of the world’s opium, the need of the hour is an integrated response to the drug problem, embedded in a long-term security, development and institution-building agenda. Eradicating Afghanistan’s drug problem should receive special focus since it is related to larger

issues of administrative paralysis, poverty and lack of education.

For the economic system to revive, agricultural revival holds the key. Afghanistan had preserved an agro-economic system for many decades and reviving agriculture back to the 1979 levels of productivity would be a pre-requisite to further growth and development. This in itself has two immediate requirements; de-mining of agricultural lands and restoration of the 1979 water management system, with further improvements as a follow on. Afghanistan has considerable agricultural potential, even though only 12 per cent of the land is arable. Re-focusing

on the food crops and cash crops holds the key. Wheat has to be accorded the highest priority in Afghanistan's agricultural revival. During the decade of the 1980s, dry fruit produced in Afghanistan amounted to 60 per cent of the world market; however, by 1990, Kabul held only 16 per cent of the world market. Reviving the orchards and the entire marketing system of quality high-value fruits such as pomegranates and dry fruits need to be placed as second-priority in the crop sector. Although cotton is more irrigation-dependent than wheat, it has always been the cash crop of the average Afghan farmer and could be given the status of being a third-priority crop.

Reforming the Education System

Equal access to quality education for all remains deeply enshrined in the 2003 Constitution as well as in the National Education Strategic Plan (2006-10). Although the Afghan Constitution guarantees equal access to education for all Afghans, regardless of place of residence, ethnicity, or language, the education graph and patterns in Afghanistan display a very dismal picture. Afghanistan's Second Millennium Development Goal states that "... by 2020, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling." Afghanistan has a 6-3-3 formal education structure. Primary school has an official entry age of seven and duration of six grades. Secondary school is divided into two cycles: lower secondary consists of grades 7-9, and upper secondary consists of grades 10-12. According to the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Data on Education, in principle, public education is free and primary and lower secondary education comprising the nine-year basic education sequence is compulsory. However, decades of being war-torn have resulted in the destruction of thousands of schools and, as a result, illiteracy has been at the core of Afghanistan turning into a retrogressive society which peaked during the rule of the Taliban.

Freedom and access to education has been most hit in the highly unstable insurgency-torn southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan in provinces such

as Helmand, Oruzgan, Paktia and Zabul where an estimated five million school-aged children are not enrolled in school and less than 10 per cent of the students are girls. The situation got further worsened when the Taliban outlawed the education of women and girls. In contrast, nearly 48 per cent of students are girls in the Bamiyan Province.

According to the UNESCO, Afghanistan's literacy figures are among the worst in Asia—50 per cent for men and a mere 18 per cent for women. Thus Afghanistan has a tough job on its hand and a long road ahead setting an enrolment target of 75 per cent for boys and 60 per cent for girls by 2015. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE), although there has been a seven-fold increase in the number of teachers since 2001, only 22 per cent meet the national qualification grade. Besides, more than 5,000 schools have been built and renovated in the last decade, and as of 2013, there are 16,000 schools across Afghanistan with another 8,000 schools required to be constructed. Although more than nine million students (40 per cent of them girls) have been enrolled in schools across the country, as many as three million (24 per cent of the children) remain deprived of their right to education, according to Ghulam Farooq Wardak, Afghanistan's Minister of Education. Unfortunately, estimates state that the current statistics in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan indicate that by 2020, illiteracy will likely be at over

80 per cent especially in the violence-prone southern and eastern provinces.

The overall onus vis-à-vis providing education to all has to be a mix of policy and practice focusing on the concept of inclusive education in ways such as development of memory and communication skills that increase accessibility to schools and heavy investment in education-driven projects. There are various literacy programmes supported by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that have aided reform in the education policy and coordinated with schools to

increase accessibility for all children including those belonging to the minority groups. The Afghan government along with its international partners needs to adopt ground-breaking policies and initiatives to shield schools and students from all/any political abuse and treat all educational institutions as pure civilian entities the purpose of which is to provide education and contribute to the literacy mission of Afghanistan. There needs to be greater synchronization between the Ministry of Education and the local councils, tribal elders and leadership to build up support for equal access to education for all children in Afghanistan.

Repatriation of Afghan Refugees

With the possibility of a civil war and the Taliban re-emerging as a major political force, Afghan refugees are weighing their options. As many as six million refugees have voluntarily repatriated to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran since 2001, when the Taliban was ousted from power. However, amid growing apprehension that the Taliban will regain power and violence will increase with the 2014 US-led troop withdrawal, a UN report states that the number of Afghan refugees who returned to Afghanistan in 2013 was 40 per cent lower than the number who returned in 2012. The internally displaced people (IDPs) face food and water shortages and there is no land availability where they can ideally be rehabilitated. "Who would want to come back in these conditions? The number of people fleeing Afghanistan far exceeds those coming back... The number of IDPs is increasing and the out-migration is increasing too... there has been a spike in the applications for European countries," says Abdul Samad Hami, Deputy Minister of the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation.

As in September 2013, there were 590,184 Afghans registered by UN refugee agency UNHCR as "internally displaced", compared to about 425,000 as of 2012. These may be conservative figures, given that they do not capture IDPs scattered in urban areas, those displaced by natural

disasters, or IDPs not accessible to humanitarian agencies for security reasons, according to Dan Tyler at the Norwegian Refugee Council. With over 60 per cent of the population under the age of 25 expected to soon enter the labour market, the employment scenario is going to be more challenging. Approximately 400,000 youth enter the labour market in Afghanistan each year having limited skills. Besides, when it comes to coping with the internally displaced people, the fact that an extremely fragile economy with no jobs, acute food and water shortages and no availability of land where the IDPs could ideally be stationed, tend to compound the ongoing quandary. In fact, all these factors are primary drivers that dissuade refugees from returning home.

The re-integration of Afghan refugees back in Afghan society coupled with their safe and voluntary repatriation should be placed high on the agenda of the government. In its annual report on the globally displaced people, the UNHCR stated that with close to 2.6 million refugees in 82 countries, Afghanistan remains the leading country of origin of refugees worldwide. Pakistan hosts more Afghan refugees than any other country, with 1.6 million Afghans living there, and Iran coming up with the second-highest figure, giving refuge to more than 800,000; in addition, there are almost 18,000 Afghan refugees living in India.

Securing the Status of Women

Afghan women have always been marginalised and accorded subordinate status. However, the real blow to the rights of women came about when the fundamentalist religious force Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996 and further eroded the very basic rights of women to an extent that it took a retrogressive turn. Upto 2001, the regressive Taliban forced Afghan women to be covered from head to toe with a burqa (veil) and barred them from going outside their homes without being escorted by a male relative. Education for girls was prohibited and schools for girls were shut down. Thirteen years later, there is a visible resurgence in violent crimes against women in Afghanistan. Hitting record levels and becoming increasingly brutal in 2013, rise in crime against women is a dangerous indicator of the hardliners springing back into action.

As the 2014 withdrawal approaches, attacks on pro-women legislation have multiplied. It was reported by the United Nations in December 2013 that there is a 28 per cent increase in cases of brutality against women. While the presence and contribution of the international community and provincial reconstruction teams in most of the provinces improved the condition and status of women somewhat, this may no longer be the case post-2014. The post-Taliban constitution has recognized women and men as equal

citizens and gives equal rights and protection to both. President Hamid Karzai promulgated the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Act in 2009, which criminalized rape for the first time in Afghanistan's history, thus legally obliging the state to protect women from violence.

It has been noted that the EVAW Law bans 22 harmful practices against women; however, it has been applied only in 17 per cent of the reported cases. Even as the UN Security Council held its annual open debate on women, rule of law, and transitional justice in conflict situations - a product of great normative strides in the promotion of women's rights over the past two decades - Afghanistan's EVAW law has been disparaged and heavily condemned by the conservative sections as being un-Islamic and have threatened to do away with it.

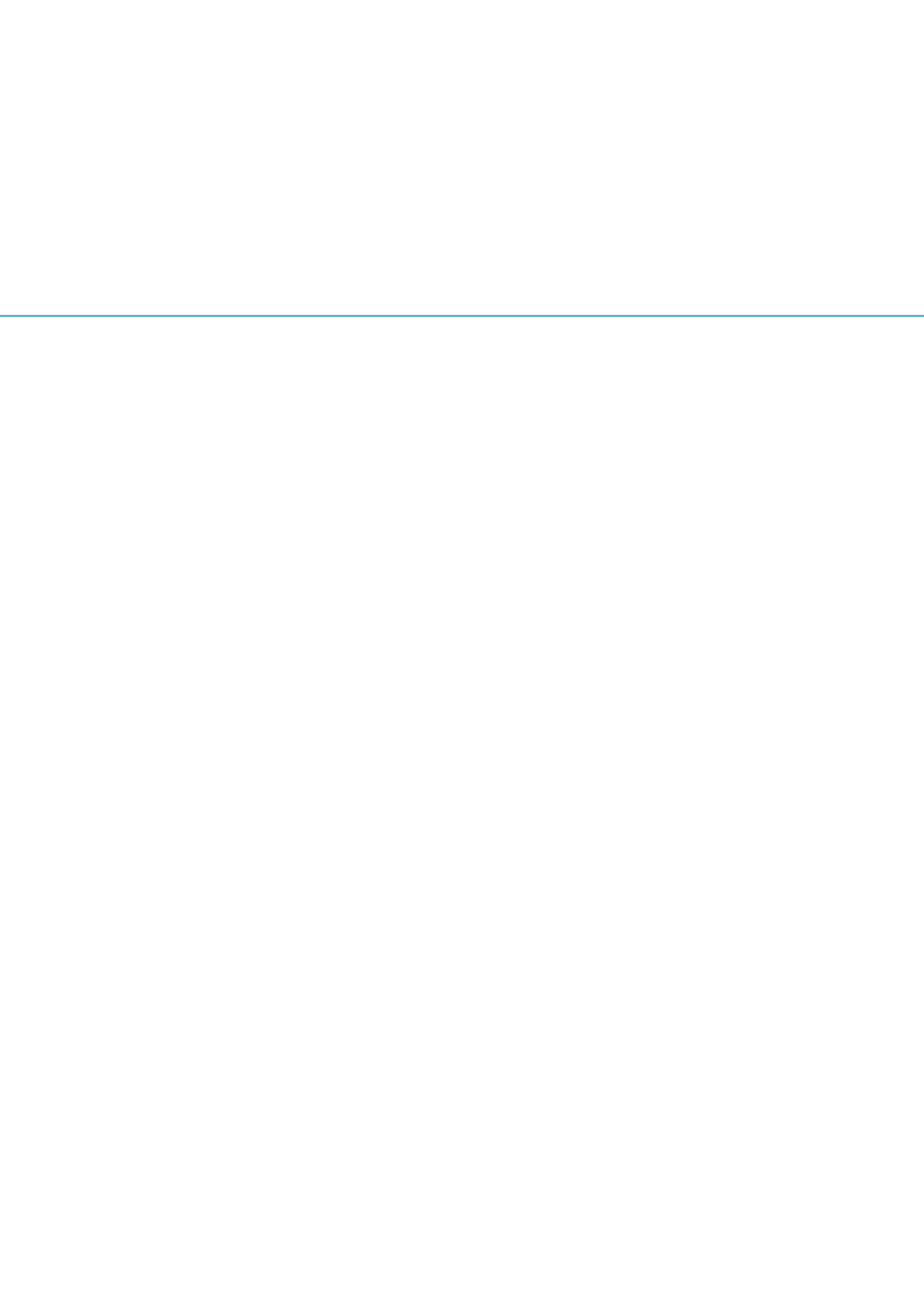
The fear of the rise of warlords and militia and return of the haunting period of the Taliban rule is likely to strengthen licensing of violence and culture of impunity. Afghan women undoubtedly will become the easiest and most susceptible target. In October 2013, Louise Arbour in Foreign Policy expressed doubt on the Afghan judicial system arguing that it remains dysfunctional, with implementation of the EVAW law being uneven and that the patchy implementation of pro-women

laws raise concerns about Kabul's commitment to the same.

There needs to be a relentless struggle to restore the status and respect of women in the Afghan society and this can be achieved through supporting women's rights along with their political and economic empowerment and only then would any reconciliation prove functional resulting in Afghanistan becoming a truly inclusive and democratic state.

The splintered political scene in Afghanistan with prevailing tribalism, militias and ethnicity-centric groupings poses a key challenge towards achieving

political pluralism that is increasingly being challenged by despotic tendencies. It is hoped that any/all future political dispensation would commit itself to the ideals and values of transparent and effective governance, social democracy, building and strengthening civil society and public institutions, promoting democratic ideals and social justice, advocating human rights and providing gender equality. While fighting extremism and militancy in all forms and manifestations remains a principal objective, a military solution alone will not be the resolution to Afghanistan's manifold problems. A sustainable, long-term solution has to be a political one that is rooted in social and economic justice based on the rule of law.



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