

**India – Afghanistan Relations:
Observations from the 1995-96 Period of
the Indian Embassy in Afghanistan**

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Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	The Historical Context	2
	<i>A. Indian - Afghan Relations: A Historical Context</i>	2
	<i>B. Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan and India's Stand</i>	8
	<i>C. Post-Soviet Invasion Afghanistan</i>	12
3.	Reopening of the Indian Mission in 1995-96 and the Internal Situation	12
4.	Fall of Kabul in 1996	18
5.	Relations of Other Countries with Afghanistan	20
	<i>A. Pakistan</i>	20
	<i>B. Iran</i>	21
	<i>C. Russia</i>	22
	<i>D. The U.S.</i>	23
6.	Conclusion	26
	<i>References</i>	27

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Introduction

Kabul regime had launched a major diplomatic initiative in March 1995 by requesting various foreign governments to reopen their Embassies in Kabul. The main reason behind this effort was that Kabul was now out of rocketing range in several years. Ahmed Shah Masood's forces had pushed back Taliban far away from the outskirts of Kabul. Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had already been dislodged by the Taliban from Charasyab and Rishkor and had retreated to Sarobi on Jalalabad-Kabul highway. Therefore, the capital city of Afghanistan and its outskirts were under full control of the government. Life in the city had returned to normal. Kabul airport had become operational and Afghan Airlines Ariana had started its Kabul-New Delhi flight. Moreover, Burhanuddin Rabbani had declared that he would continue as President of Afghanistan. Considering the safety and security of its personnel, Govt of India decided to reopen its Mission and I had been appointed India's Cd'A. The Mission was reopened on 2nd May 1995. Internal situation in Afghanistan had been described as I saw it personally upon my arrival in Kabul. Similarly, relations of Afghanistan with India and other countries have been incorporated based on my experiences and reminiscences of my tenure in 1995-96. As regards India's stand on the Soviet intervention, I found that there was some resentment among some Mujahideen leaders. They wanted that India should have condemned the Soviet invasion of

Afghanistan publicly. However, considering mainly the leverage given to Pakistan by the US in terms of economic aid and military supplies and the US's rapprochement with China, India could not afford to jeopardise its partnership with the Soviet Union.

Living conditions became harsh, especially after September 1995 when the Taliban had made some advancement in the south-east of Kabul. The Taliban started firing rockets on Kabul once again. Despite our discomfort, we continued to support the Afghan people till the last moment. The masses showered lot of love and affection on us. In fact, India's reputation among the Afghans has been commendable. We left Kabul on 26 September 1996 after Ahmed Shah Masood had decided to retreat towards the north and we had been approached to close down our Embassy in view of deteriorating security situation.

The Historical Context

A. Indian - Afghan Relations: A Historical Context

India and Afghanistan have had historical and cultural ties for a very long time. Relations between the people of India and Afghanistan may rather be traced to the Indus Valley Civilization. Once upon a time, Afghanistan was a part of an undivided India and was being nourished by Buddhist, Hindu and Zoroastrian cultures¹ until the arrival of Islam in the seventh century A.D. Thereafter, both the countries have been neighbors for centuries.

1 Muzaffer H. Syed in his book on Indo-Afghan Relations categorically states in preface itself that Afghanistan has been a part of extended empires of India for several centuries throughout the history. He also says that in undivided India, the north-western region was a part of various kingdoms, based in Afghanistan. It has been added by the author that much of Afghanistan was influenced by Buddhist, Hindu and Zoroastrian cultures, until the arrival of Islam in 7th century.

In fact the above position has been reiterated by many historians. The history of the Mauryan empire is a witness. The Mauryan kingdom (especially during Ashoka's period spread upto Herat bordering Khorasan province of Iran.

However, for the last nearly seventy years, following the partition of India, the two countries have not been close neighbors. Pakistan lies between India and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, relations between the two countries have traditionally been strong and friendly. For India, relations with Afghanistan are important in view of the fact that although India still shares a very short stretch as its border with Afghanistan, but, incidentally, that part lies in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), which India does not recognize. Cultural linkages and strategic aspects across South Asia make it imperative for India to seek bilaterally beneficial relationship with Afghanistan. Unfortunately, relations between the two countries were briefly halted during the period when the Taliban were in power from 27th September 1996 to 16th November 2001.

India has been continuously supporting various Afghan rulers, starting from King Zahir Shah to the present day President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani. Even during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, India was the only country from South Asia that recognized Soviet-backed governments in Kabul and continued to provide assistance. Keeping in view India's neutral and constructive approach towards mutual reconciliation in Afghanistan's internal conflicts, Indian policy had no difficulty with whosoever was in power in Kabul.²

Afghanistan keeps such an important place in Indian psyche that India was able to re-open its Embassy in early 1993 when complete normalcy had yet to return to Afghanistan. India had to pay a price for it. Sharpnels from a rocket fired by Hizb-e-Islami forces of Hikmatyar from Charasyab killed one of our India-based security guards. When a scurry of rockets had become the order of the day, India had to make an exit. India, again, reopened its

2 In regard to our policy on Afghanistan, India has retained its contact with Kabul throughout, as long as government there is not opposed to India. (The Taliban has been the only exception because they were hostile towards India). Mr. P. Stobdan also says this in his book "The Afghan Conflict and India" p.64.

Embassy in September 1993. It was fully functional. However, it so happened that our Cd'A had organized a dinner on 31st December, but Hizb-e-Islami forces started firing rockets towards Shash Darak where our Embassy residence was located. It was the time of arrival of invited guests. None of them could reach to have food in view of the barrage of rockets. Thereafter, security conditions had worsened to such an extent that most of the Missions had to temporarily close down in January 1994.

When Kabul was no longer safe, India had even thought of having some diplomatic presence in Herat in 1994 and a reconnaissance team had visited the place to explore the possibilities. The team had stayed with the Governor of Herat, General Ismael Khan. However, considering various reasons including connections for travel/transportation, it was decided to defer the decision for the time being. Thereafter, the reconnaissance teams had even been sent to Kabul twice by the government of India to study the living conditions. The team leader had met Ahmed Shah Masood and other Afghan dignitaries in Kabul. India wanted to have its presence among the friendly Afghans as soon as possible.

It must be emphasized that India's ability to make a quick adjustment with the new situation in Afghanistan was the result of its basic policy framework towards that country pursued since Independence, and these aspects are likely to remain in future. Firstly, India's primary interest was to ensure a strong and stable Afghanistan as it firmly believed that the territorial integrity of that country is vital for India's own security. Secondly, India always regarded friendly relations with Afghanistan as important not only for historical and cultural reasons, but also for strategic reasons, just as it has with Iran. Thirdly, India always respected Afghanistan's non-aligned and independent foreign policy. It has been supportive of any movement/revolution or change in Afghanistan that was progressive in nature and was geared towards bringing about modernization and socio-economic transformation among the Afghan people. Fourthly, India never deviated from

its consistent policy of not taking sides in any internal conflicts while only dealing with the ruling regime in Kabul, as long as the government there was not hostile towards India. (Incidentally, Taliban has been the only exceptional case that India has not recognized). Fifthly, India provided economic and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan irrespective of the internal political formation and without participating in any manner in the internal conflicts of that country.

It would be no exaggeration to say that mishandling and, rather, bungling of Pakistan-Afghan relations by Pakistan have gone to India's advantage. This may be due to rapid changes in government between Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. This, of course, is a well-known fact that Pakistan's Afghan policy has remained in the hands of the army and the ISI. Pakistan Army Chiefs have gone on record to state that they would not allow the civilian government to control Afghan and Kashmir policy. Many Afghan leaders had resented that Pakistanis were giving too much prominence to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. According to some reports, the ISI was giving him almost fifty percent of the American aid while ignoring the other Afghan groups. One of the most important factors of Pakistan's support for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was the latter's commitment to end Afghanistan's traditional and close ties with India. For the ISI, Hekmatyar qualified as the most suitable candidate to also fulfill Pakistan's dreams of strategic depth in Afghanistan in the event of a conflict with India. Among other mistakes made by Pakistan was their hasty decision to push for a settlement with the Mojaddedi government on the issue of Durand Line. Kabul once again looked for Delhi's support when Sibghatuallah Mojaddedi had paid a visit to Delhi soon afterwards and revived contacts with Indian leaders. Subsequently, Rabbani also took the same view and refused to compromise on the Durand Line.

In view of the above policy, India adjusted with President Burhanuddin Rabbani and reopened its Embassy on 2nd May 1995. He had, on several occasions, expressed his gratitude to

the government of India not only for rendering humanitarian and economic assistance, but also for raising its voice against Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan. There was hardly a month when he would not call Indian Cd'A for some meaningful conversation. Since Pakistan never allowed India to use the transit route through Pakistan, India used to transport essential goods by air. The Indira Gandhi Hospital for Children had also generated a lot of admiration for India. India always maintained the supply of medicines and medical equipment for the hospital. India gave such a large quantity of humanitarian assistance that it disturbed Pakistan. As relations between India and Afghanistan were getting closer day by day, Pakistan started saying that India was giving military assistance to the Kabul regime.

In February 1996, Ahmed Shah Massod attended an Iftar party hosted by India's Cd'A at his residence. It was attended by several Ministers. Masood Khalili, Afghanistan's Ambassador-designate to New Delhi, was also present. Ahmed Shah Massod spoke about India in glowing terms and praised India for all its assistance and for keeping its Embassy open in Kabul despite tough living conditions. A number of senior Indian diplomats also visited Kabul and called on President Burhanuddin Rabbani, Ahmed Shah Massod, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar etc and discussed various issues of mutual interest. Dr. Abdul Rahman, Civil Aviation Minister and close confidante of Massod paid several visits to Delhi to call on Indian dignitaries.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had been sworn as Prime Minister of Afghanistan on 26th June, 1996. The Government of India was so pleased with the new developments that Prime Minister Deve Gowda sent a congratulatory message to the new Prime Minister. Thereafter, when India's Cd'A had paid a call on Hekamatyar, the latter had praised India's stand in resolving the Afghan conflict without taking anybody's side. The new Afghan Prime Minister had also honored the invitation of India's Cd'A for the reception held on 15th August 1996.

A team of doctors visited Kabul twice to fit artificial legs. There were many people in Afghanistan whose legs had been amputated because of land mines. A health camp had been organized in the military hospital in Kabul and Indian doctors had generated a tremendous amount of goodwill for India. Some Afghan leaders might have had some reservations with our closeness to the Russian Federation, but none of them expressed any hostility towards India. Most of them were appreciative of our ancient ties of friendship.

The resilience shown by India all these years in the post-Soviet period also helped India to restore rapport with the new rulers in Kabul. During 1995-96 especially, it was extremely difficult to keep the Indian Embassy open in a crisis-stricken city where the security situation was quite fragile. There were a number of days when the India-based officials hardly got any sleep because of ongoing fighting between forces of Jamiat-e-Islami and the Taliban on the outskirts of Kabul near Charasyab and Rishkor. The Rabbani government was fully aware of our difficulties. Maybe, that was the reason that President Rabbani had decided to award all the three Cd'As (India, Iran and Turkey) and Indonesian Ambassador Abdul Gani with 'Syed Jamalluddin Award' to keep our morale high. A function had been organized in this regard where the President showered tremendous amount of appreciation for the positive role being played by all the four countries. There was constant interaction among us personally as well as over the phone.

Relations between India and Afghanistan had become so close and strong that New Delhi once again became Kabul's window and gateway when Rabbani's government had sought to expand and diversify its bilateral relations with the outside world, and to counter Pakistan's intrusive attitude towards Afghanistan. New Delhi had also become the only place from where the Afghan National Airlines Ariana would operate its regular flights.

B. Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan and India's Stand

Ch. Charan Singh was Prime Minister of India and the country was passing through a transition when the Soviet Union sent its forces into Afghanistan in December, 1979. He strongly condemned the incident. Our Representative at the United Nations in New York was asked to issue a statement criticizing the invasion and seeking the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. General elections were to take place in India barely after a month.

Mrs. Indian Gandhi was swept back into power in January 1980. Thereafter, the earlier stand taken by India underwent a significant change. Instead of condemning the Soviet occupation publicly, she rather “supported the Afghan revolution leadership and urged them to appreciate the need for Soviet withdrawal over a period of time.” This statement was construed as a pro-Soviet stand not only by western media and various analysts, but some Afghan leaders as well. It is a fact that this kind of impression about India's stand was not considered proper because India has always opposed foreign presence in any country as a matter of policy. But word had spread around, especially among some Afghan leaders, that India was a supporter of the Soviet Union.

I experienced this during my stay in Kabul in 1995-96. Calls had been fixed with some prominent leaders soon after my taking over charge as Cd'A. There was, however, no response from a particular Afghan leader despite two reminders. Initially, we thought that he was too busy to find some time for my call. However, our discreet enquiries revealed that the particular leader was not interested in meeting me. He was reported to have said that India had not extended any help to Afghan Mujahideen at a critical time of jihad against the Soviet Union. I was aware of the fact that the particular person was a hard-line leader and enjoyed strong Saudi support. He was also the spokesman of Mujahideen factions in 1989, while still in Pakistan. Nevertheless, it was conveyed to him through some suitable channels that India had never remained silent. It had raised its voice against the Soviet occupation in a

number of bilateral meetings between the two sides. Mrs. Gandhi had refused to accept any of the explanations forwarded by the Soviet side to justify their intervention in Afghanistan. She had instead asked the Soviets to create conditions for an early withdrawal. She is reported to have conveyed this to the Soviet leader Brezhnev in Moscow in December 1980 and thereafter in September, 1982. The Non-Aligned Summit held in New Delhi under India's leadership had clearly underlined this aspect when it expressed its opposition to "all forms of outside interference in the internal affairs of the countries of the region."

After Mrs. Gandhi's death³ on 31st October, 1984, she was succeeded by Rajiv Gandhi. However, there was no change in India's policy. During his visit to Moscow, he stated on May 22, 1985 that "we are not for any country to interfere or intervene in the internal affairs of another country, "and that "the Soviet Union should go out of Afghanistan." The U.S. side was aware of India's strong reservation on the Soviet occupation and continuing presence in Afghanistan. It is said that U.S. President Carter had publicly acknowledged that India's stand on the Afghanistan conflict was positive and that India was not endorsing the intervention.

It may be mentioned here that relations between India and the Soviet Union were very close and cordial. Soviet Union had been helping India by using its veto power in the U.N. over the Kashmir issue. The economic and military aid provided by the Soviet Union to India led to the formation of strong strategic and diplomatic ties between the two countries. The two countries had also signed the 'Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation' on 9th August 1971. Thereafter, India had liberated Bangladesh despite a serious threat from the US. The Soviet Union rather served as a bulwark against Pakistan and as a counterweight to both China and the U.S.

3 It is also stated by Shri S.D. Muni on page 335 in his article entitled 'India's Afghan Policy: Emerging from the Cold.' This article is a part of the book on "Afghanistan Crisis: Issues and Perspectives." There are several articles on Afghanistan in this book.

Therefore, Mrs. Gandhi chose the medium of bilateral meetings instead of censuring the Soviet Union publicly. The Soviet Union was not comfortable with India's stand on the Afghanistan issue. They were rather hopeful that India would show greater understanding of their position. India was compelled to show its disappointment because of the fact that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan had provided legitimacy for the U.S. and Pakistani interference in Afghanistan, which had created difficulties in securing Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. India was concerned that this had rather strengthened the military alliance between the U.S. and Pakistan, resulting in a massive supply of economic and military support to Pakistan as a frontline state. The high-tech military supplies included the F-16 and AWACS, tilting the regional balance to Pakistan's advantage.

A more worrying factor for India was that the Soviet invasion had provided a golden opportunity for Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq. He utilized it first to come out of international isolation following his military coup and the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Secondly, and rather more importantly, he cleverly used the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as the strongest pretext to build up Pakistan's military to settle scores with India over the Kashmir issue. He decided that all arms and ammunitions and funds to the Mujahideen leadership would be channeled through Pakistan and no outside agencies including the CIA would be doing this. The ISI was made the sole agency to distribute the arms and funds to the Afghan Mujahideen groups. As a result, the influence of the ISI was vastly strengthened. In addition to this, regional security in general and India's security in particular, were threatened by the rise of Islamic militant groups propped up by the alliance. The rise of Islamic militancy subsequently led to an increase in terrorist activities in the 1990s in the Jammu & Kashmir state of India.

During this period, Pakistan also sought to acquire the ability to produce a nuclear weapon. However, because of its interest in the Afghan conflict, the U.S. turned a blind eye to Pakistan's

nuclear programme in the 1980s. The post-mortem analysis of the U.S. acquiescence over the Pakistani Afghan policy tends to suggest that it had only served the interest of Pakistan's rivalry with India rather than restoring peace in Afghanistan. For Weinbaum and Harder, Pakistan's policy goals in Afghanistan were (a) counter Afghan moves to carve out Pushtunistan; (b) minimize India's influence and presence in Afghanistan; (c) see Afghanistan as an asset in providing strategic depth in the event of a wide conflict with India; (d) foster friendly if not subservient regimes in Kabul; (e) use of Afghanistan to attract regional and extra-regional powers (especially the U.S.) for security leverage in its disputes, especially with India

The Soviets told Mrs. Gandhi that the U.S. and China presented a direct threat to India. The sophisticated weapons supplied by the U.S. to Pakistan could be used against India. They also informed her that the U.S. was expanding its base in Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and China was continuing to give training to arms saboteurs in the north-east with a view to destabilize India. Incidentally, China had also joined the anti-Soviet front in Afghanistan resulting into a reinforced Sino-U.S.-Pak alliance.

Pakistan, the principal member of the anti-Soviet front, was extremely active in keeping India out of any important process of negotiations involving Afghanistan. India's role was further curtailed by the fact that India did not have a direct border with Afghanistan. The formula that was generally worked out to select the countries participating in the negotiations included the great powers and close neighbors. India did not fit into either of those categories for the negotiations carried under the UN auspices. However, it kept in touch with the negotiations through the Afghan regime in Kabul and the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the Soviet troops in Afghanistan started withdrawing according to the schedule laid down in the Geneva accords signed in April 1988.

C. Post-Soviet Invasion Afghanistan

The withdrawal of troops was completed in February 1989. After the withdrawal, several Mujahideen commanders competed with each other to reach Kabul. India, according to J.N. Dixit, former Foreign Secretary, followed a three-pronged policy course: (a) to maintain contact with the leaders of all the groups including Sibghatullah Mojadedi, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Rashid Dostum so that it could deal with whosoever came to power in Kabul ; (b) to continue to provide assistance in the economic and public health spheres to the extent feasible and (c) to explore possibilities , in collaboration with states like Russia and Iran, in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan.

Even after the Soviet withdrawal, India continued to assist Dr. Najibullah's government. He visited India in December 1987 and in May, 1988. He again had a visit of New Delhi in August, 1990 and signed an agreement for Prevention of Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs. The basic thrust of India's policy was in 'favor of a political settlement of the problem arrived at by the Afghan themselves without external intervention and interference, which takes into account the existing realities and legitimate interests of all concerned, India supports the preservation of Afghanistan's status as a sovereign, non-aligned and independent country.'

In addition to the above, India established contacts with the leaders, not only of the Kabul regime, but also with all possible other Afghan groups, including anti-Soviet Mujahideen guerilla leaders. The erstwhile Minister of State for External Affairs, Natwar Singh even went to Paris to talk to the former Afghan King Zahir Shah, assuming that he could have a role to play in uniting various factions in the interest of a stable and neutral Afghanistan.

Reopening of the Indian Mission in 1995-96 and the Internal Situation

It is a well-known fact that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was initially favored by the Pakistani ISI in terms of disproportionate supply

of weapons and funds over other Afghan Mujahideen. However, he was intensely disliked by the other Afghan groups, not only because of how he was treated by Pakistan, but also on account of his eccentricities. He had also alienated most of the countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran and the West with his abrasive and arrogant behavior. His antipathy towards the U.S. also became evident when he was in New York in September 1985, and flatly refused to go to Washington. He had failed to deliver the goods to Pakistan by dislodging President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmed Shah Masood from power in Kabul. Pakistan, therefore, brought Taliban into the picture in October 1994.

In the beginning, both Rabbani and Masood were very considerate and sympathetic towards Taliban. They were under the impression that the Taliban were an anti-Hekmatyar outfit. Both of them had some meetings with their representatives and made a number of gestures to them. It was soon revealed that the Taliban was a pro-Pakistani militia and an overwhelmingly Pushtun outfit. They were not at all in favour of a Tajik-dominated government in Kabul. The Taliban were rather not comfortable in dealing with other ethnic groups.

Having captured Kandhar, Uruzgan, Zabul, Paktia and Paktika in November 1994, the Taliban advanced towards Wardak and got it by early 1995. By February, 1995, they reached Charasyab, the headquarters of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, located just at a distance of 16 kilometers south of Kabul. After his defeat at the hands of the Taliban, Gulbuddin decided to abandon the place and retreated to Sarobi on Jalalabad-Kabul highway. Taliban were now very close to Kabul. They posed a serious threat to Ahmed Shah Masood, who was in complete control of the city after a vicious strife with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Dostum and Hazaras. It was now time for Masood to turn towards the Taliban. He inflicted heavy damage forcing the Taliban away from Charasyab and Rishkor in early March 1995. Kabul and its suburbs were thus peaceful. Herat was already with Rabbani. The Kabul government, therefore, tried its campaign in March 1995 to regain an international stature.

For the first time in years, the capital city was not under fire or divided by hostile armies. The international airport at Kabul had been re-opened and Afghan Ariana flights had started operating between Kabul and New Delhi. A major diplomatic effort was launched to persuade foreign governments to reopen their Embassies. The Government of India, therefore, decided to reopen its Mission in Kabul. Soon after, Turkey also followed suit. Three Embassies belonging to Pakistan, Iran and Indonesia were already functional well before our arrival.

It was on 1st May 1995 that we landed at the Kabul airport by Ariana airline flight from New Delhi to reopen our Mission which had been closed down in January 1994 because of adverse security situation caused by ongoing civil war in Afghanistan among various Mujahideen factions. We were warmly received by the Afghan Chief of Protocol at the airport. Since the only 5-star hotel known as ‘Inter-Continental Hotel’ had been badly ravaged by artillery fire, we were accommodated in the German Club located in Shahar-e-Nav at a distance of nearly five kilometers from our Embassy. Next day, a call had been fixed with the Afghan Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. He spoke very highly of India and conveyed thanks to GOI for reopening the Mission. The Minister assured us of providing every possible assistance to make our stay comfortable. Thereafter, we started working in the Mission from 2 May, 1995.

The living conditions in Kabul were very harsh. First of all, as a result of fierce fighting between the forces of Ahmed Shah Masood and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, much of Kabul, especially its suburbs had been razed to the ground. Aman palace, just outside the city, was in a shambles. The destroyed residences and the marks of bullets thereupon could be seen everywhere. One Million were killed and a million were seriously wounded of Afghans had either been killed or were seriously wounded. It seemed as if nobody bothered for the security and safety of the suffering Afghans. Continued fighting had also forced many people to flee from their homes for safety. Nearly one-third of the population of the country

was living as refugees in Pakistan and Iran. There was no central authority to look after them. Afghanistan had rather been divided among powerful warlords whose rule was corrupt and oppressive. They were plundering and killing their own people. Essential goods were scarcely available. Health and sanitation facilities had been badly affected. Apart from Kabul, most of the educational institutions including schools, colleges and universities had been closed almost throughout the country, thus further adding to the illiteracy and backwardness. There was no power in the city. Most of the electric poles and the wires had been vandalized.

Most of the Afghans depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihood. Unfortunately, various parts of the country in Afghanistan experienced the worst drought since 1971. Warring factions had even destroyed standing crops and fruit trees. Some areas were already suffering because of severe famine. Many people lost their jobs and there were no alternative employment opportunities. Inflation was at its peak and the Afghani currency was losing its value day by day. Most of the Afghans including refugees, therefore, depended on international aid being extended by some UN agencies and foreign NGOs. Considering the fact that there was hardly any institution of governance, there was an increase in crime. Production of drugs and its trafficking had increased manifold. It would thus be seen that the social and economic life was deteriorating day after day.

It was May when we arrived in Kabul and unlike Delhi, the weather was pleasant, Kabul being a hill-station situated at an altitude of 5,900 feet above sea level in a narrow valley, wedged between the Hindi Kush Mountains. Though there was no power in Kabul and our Club was using a generator in the evenings, we did not experience much difficulty. Most of the officials would praise Kabul for its weather and the availability of fruits and vegetables. Our good days soon came to an abrupt end in June 1995 when all of us were woken up around midnight. A fighter jet flying at a low altitude, almost touching the roof of our Club, dropped two bombs of 500 kilograms each in our vicinity. The

fighter plane was on its way back by the time anti-aircraft guns started booming from the nearby hilltops. It was a pitch-dark night and the sound of the aircraft was deafening. We were so panic-stricken for some time that none of us opened our doors. I had an apprehension that our Mission had been targeted. I got some relief when one of our security guards informed me on the phone that they (four India-based security guards) as well as the Embassy were safe. The bombs were dropped nearby in Shahar-e-Nav and three people died on the spot and many people were injured. There was plenty of damage to the properties in the area. Incidentally, the bomber had come all the way from Mazar-e-Sharif and had been sent by Rashid Dostum.

We had shifted to regular houses after a period of two months as per the GOI rules. Since there was no power in Kabul, life was very difficult. Diesel was in short supply. Therefore, we used to run our generators all day in the Mission and at the most up to 10 p.m. in the evenings. In fact, nobody in Kabul was using generators beyond 10 p.m. Thereafter, the capital city used to look like a big graveyard. There was so much silence in the city. Even the drop of a pin would resound in the valley. It would be difficult to pass, especially dark nights. Both our Mission and the houses had walls of sand-bags to avoid any damage from the shrapnel of rockets. Though Ahmed Shah Masood had pushed back Taliban from Charasyab in February 1995, they had staged a comeback in October 1995. Unfortunately, Kabul came back within the rocketing range of Taliban. The Taliban were aiming their rockets at the Presidential palace, but the rockets would often miss their targets and land short of their targets killing innocent people.

It was shocking news for both Rabbani and Masood when their Governor Ismael Khan lost Herat on September 5, 1995 to the Taliban. They had suspected a Pakistani hand in Herat. Next day, a big mob ransacked the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul and stabbed Ambassador Qaji Humayun and a few other diplomats. A staff member was killed. The Ambassador had to be airlifted to Jalalabad for treatment. The Embassy, which had earlier served as Embassy of the British Empire, had been razed to the ground.

Pakistan closed its Embassy after this incident. The security situation in the city started deteriorating further and the incident damaged relations between the Pakistan and Kabul regime. The attack on its Embassy in Kabul was a turning point. From this point onwards, Pakistan started backing Taliban more proactively.

The Taliban would carry out air raids as well from Kandhar. Once an India-based journalist from Islamabad was visiting me in the Mission and we were discussing the current situation in Afghanistan in early 1996. At that very moment, the Taliban carried out an air attack so close to our Mission that both our chairs starting shaking badly as a result of tremors caused by the bombs. Two houses were almost turned into a big well by the heavy bombs. Five people died. The Taliban crossed all limits in June 1996 when they fired 140 rockets towards Sarobi and Kabul. It was a day when the diplomacy of Tehran brought President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar together. Gulbuddin was coming to join the Kabul regime as Prime Minister. As soon as he left Sarobi for Kabul, the Taliban blocked his way with a barrage of heavy rockets. He had to go back twice. Gulbuddin could reach Kabul only in the evening. His swearing ceremony was held at the Inter-continental hotel in Kabul. Surprisingly, three rockets came there as well. There was a commotion in the gathering. Some Pakistani supporters were also there in the crowd. One was heard saying, "Are the Taliban not aware that we are also here?" Thirty-seven people were killed that day. It so happened that the glass panes of the Embassy residence were shattered twice due to rocket thuds. Maybe, the Taliban were firing at the residence, but they failed in meeting their target. This had become a frequent occurrence. There were several nights when we could hardly sleep because of heavy fighting in the vicinity of Kabul. We could hear the big sounds of artillery since it was a valley surrounded by mountain ranges. On the whole, the security situation remained extremely fragile almost throughout our stay in Kabul from 1st May 1995 till 26 September 1996. There was a looming fear that one could be killed at any moment.

In view of the rocket attacks and air raids carried out by the Taliban, Kabul airport was closed down in October 1995 itself and the Ariana flight of Afghanistan started operating from the Bagram airbase, 70 kilometers to the north of Kabul.

Fall of Kabul in 1996

Till the advent of Taliban, India had a major presence in Kabul and was providing humanitarian assistance. However, the ongoing civil war was getting intensified and it made it extremely difficult for India to keep its Embassy open. Having captured Kandhar, Uruzgan, Zabul, Paktia and Paktia in November 1994, they advanced towards Wardak, Charasyab and Rishkor in February 1995 where they were halted for some time by Ahmed Shah Masood. Having captured Herat in the west in September 1995, they were preparing for Kabul. It was in early July 1996 that the head of the Saudi Arab General Intelligence, Prince Turki-al-Faisal Saud visited Pakistan to give a final shape to the Taliban's operation. Thereafter, the Taliban took Jalalabad on September 11, Surobi on September 24 and Kabul on 27 September, 1996. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. were reportedly helping. Pakistan was providing all the logistics including its army regulars whereas Saudi Arabia and the U.S. were providing funds and military equipment. The security conditions deteriorated so much that India hardly had any other option except to close down its Embassy on 26th September 1996.

On 24 September 1996, Civil Aviation Minister, Dr. Abdul Rahman accompanied by another Minister came to the Indian Embassy Residence and said, "India had shown its friendship towards Afghanistan by extending a lot of aid and assistance. The time had now come for Afghanistan to express its friendship towards India even at the cost of our lives." He stated that they would stop the advancement of Taliban towards Kabul until the Indian Embassy was closed. The Taliban were being assisted by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. There was so much firing on the outskirts of Kabul that Jamiat forces could not withstand it.

He further said that the Taliban were fully equipped with modern weapons and heavy artillery, and that Ahmed Shah Masood had decided to retreat towards Panjshir valley in the north. He stated that all the India-based officials should pack up their essential stuff in their brief cases immediately and that they should come over to the Embassy Residence by the evening. There was a lull in the fighting on 25th September and India's Cd'A was subsequently told by Minister Abdul Rahman that a special Ariana plane was ready to take us to Delhi on 26th September, 1996.

It was also learnt through reliable sources on 24th September that Ahmed Shah Masood had sent his people to meet Dr. Najibullah on the U.N. premises. He was given an offer that he could accompany them towards Panjshir as Kabul regime had decided to leave the capital city without a fight. Dr. Najibullah did not have faith in them and decided to continue his stay in Kabul. It may be added that Ahmed Shah Masood had made it very clear to the concerned people that Dr. Najibullah was national property and his fate would be decided as and when there was an all-inclusive national government in Kabul. He had said that he and Rabbani would not sully their image by releasing Dr. Najibullah under any pretext. There was panic in the city on 25-26 September and most of the non-Pushtuns were preparing to vacate Kabul with a view to avoid a possible genocide by the Taliban. Sources said that Dr. Najibullah and his younger brother were approached this time by his Aide de camp and a cook on 25th September when many people were fleeing from Kabul to save their lives. The Adc told Dr. Najibullah and his younger brother that they should also abscond and that there was no government in Kabul. He further said, "There is total anarchy in Kabul." Dr. Najibullah, however, was reported to have said, "I have been the President of Afghanistan. What would be my place in history if I also run away like a coward? What will the people of Afghanistan say about me?" He said that they could leave if they wished. Thereafter, both his Adc and cook fled from Kabul. Sources further informed me that as soon as the Taliban entered Kabul, they headed towards the U.N.

premises where Dr. Najibullah and his younger brother had been staying under diplomatic protection since April 16, 1992. They forcibly entered the premises when the guards posted at the U.N. premises had refused them entry. They dragged Dr. Najibullah and his brother out brutally and killed them violently. Sources further said that after killing and hanging Najibullah, the Taliban went to the Indian Embassy Residence and enquired about the Cd'A. They asked the domestic servants, "Safir-e-Hind kujaast?" The servants said, "Hind raft." (Where is the Ambassador of India? The servants said that he had left for India.). They did not believe the domestic servants. They ransacked the house and took away a lot of stuff from there. Allegedly, Pakistani Interior Minister, Naseerullah Babar and Jamaat-ul-Ulema-Islam chief, Maulana Fazlur Rahman were leading the Taliban when they entered Kabul early on 27th September, 1996.

Relations of Other Countries with Afghanistan

A. Pakistan

Leaving aside the Taliban regime in Kabul from September 27, 1996 to 16 November, 2001, Pakistan has been unable to impose a pliable government in Kabul. The pursuit of 'strategic depth' that could be useful in the event of any conflict with India, has been at the center of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. Moreover, Pakistan has also been seeking a government in Kabul that does not intervene in ethno-nationalist issues inside Pakistan, and question the Durand Line as the boundary between the two countries. Several governments in Islamabad have tried to dilute the force of Pushtun nationalism and other centrifugal tendencies, and have sought to foster an Islamic-centric nationalism that would cut across ethnic boundaries. That is the reason why Pakistan backed Sunni Islamic parties in Afghanistan, which are predominantly Pushtun, such as Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and the Quetta Shura Taliban.

The relations between Rabbani's regime in Kabul from 1992-96 and Pakistan have never been comfortable. Though he was the President, it was Ahmed Shah Masood who would call the shots. His relations with Pakistan betrayed his mutual unease. He was well aware that Hekmatyar was being favored by the ISI. Within days of Najibullah's exit in April 1992, Masood had reached Kabul with his forces. Slogans had started appearing in Peshawar that very moment, ('How could Tajik rule Kabul?') comparing Ahmed Shah Masood to Bacha Saqao, a Tajik rebel who briefly usurped the Kabul throne in 1929. Many in the ISI were suspicious about his commitment to fighting the Soviets. Some had argued that since his stronghold of Panjshir was located at the mouth of the Salang tunnel, he could choke the Soviet's main supply. They forgot the fact that Ahmed Shah Masood was a legendary guerilla leader, and a fixed position may have been necessary for a prolonged blockade of Salang tunnel. He did put up stiff resistance whenever the Soviet forces tried to overrun the Panjshir valley. Relations between the Kabul regime and Pakistan were further spoiled when it was revealed that the Taliban were working under directives from Pakistan and their outfit was overwhelmingly a Pushtun group. The fall of Herat on 5th September 1995 was a big setback. A big crowd of Masood's supporters had ransacked the Pakistani Embassy on 6th September 1995 and had attacked the Pakistani Ambassador Qazi Humayun and all the diplomats badly. Pakistan had closed down its Embassy in Kabul after this incident. It was reopened only after the Taliban captured Kabul on 27th September 1996.

B. Iran

The Iranian Embassy was fully functional when we landed in Kabul to reopen our Mission on 2nd May 1995. It was headed by an Ambassador who was subsequently replaced by a Cd'A. Initially, Iranian thinking was on sectarian lines. It wanted a certain percentage of representation for the Shia groups in any interim arrangement after the exit of Najibullah. However, the rise of the

Taliban posed a big challenge to the Iranians because of the anti-Shia creed the Taliban had developed at the madrassas operating under the Saudi Sala influence. Secondly and more importantly, after Ahmed Shah Masood's forces pushed back Taliban as well as Hizb-e-Wahdat and took over Charasyab and Rishkor on 19 March, 1995, Taliban killed Wahdat Chief, Abdul Ali Mazari on charges of betrayal. Taliban, from this point on, were looked upon by Iran as anti-Shia and an anti-Iran group. Iran changed its foreign policy and came closer to Rabbani and Masood. Moreover, it was an initiative of Iran that brought Rabbani and Hikmatyar together in Kabul in June, 1996. Hikmatyar joined Rabbani's government as Prime Minister. The U.S. was not happy with this development and it turned in favor of the Taliban because of the Iranian move. The U.S. attitude towards the Taliban underwent a significant change after the bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salam in August 1998 after the prime suspect took refuge in Afghanistan and the Taliban refused to cooperate with the U.S. However, Iranians kept on backing the Northern Alliance militarily and financially until the ouster of the Taliban from Afghanistan in November 2001.

C. Russia

The Russians did not have any presence in Kabul in 1995-96. The only Russian, who would visit the Indian Embassy after every three-four months, was a former Defense Advisor in the previous Russian Embassy in Kabul. In fact, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Russian diplomacy primarily concentrated on consolidating the CIS and renewing Russian influence with the components of the erstwhile Soviet Union. As regards Afghanistan, the Russians favored Ahmed Shah Masood with whom they had dealt with even in the days of the Afghan Jihad in the 1990s. After taking over Kabul in 1992, Masood had returned some Russian prisoners from his custody. Russia also kept a close liaison with India and Iran; all the three countries were supporting the Northern Alliance headed by Masood in

terms of military supplies and humanitarian assistance. The rise of the Taliban was a big challenge for Russia and the Central Asian neighbors for security reasons. Russia, therefore, participated in the “Six plus-Two” meetings with a view to handle the Islamic militancy and the worst kind of Islamic fundamentalism being spread by the Taliban. The growth of Islamic movement was also due to large contributions, mainly from the Gulf States, which were used to set up Saudi Sala madrassas and to revive religion. The Russian- Taliban mutual hostility could be readily grasped as the Taliban were the only government to recognize Chechanya as an independent state and, in January 2000, allowed it to open an Embassy in Kabul.

The presence of Islamic militant groups including the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan added to the hostility towards the Taliban. Moreover, the Taliban refused to cooperate with any country in handing over Osama bin Laden and other terrorists against whom there was sufficient evidence of involvement in ghastly crimes including the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York. That is why the U.S. military intervention evoked no adverse response from any country including Russia, China and the Central Asian republics. There was a sense of relief on the Taliban’s ouster. They all welcomed the Bonn process and participated in the international conferences, convened for reconstruction and stabilization of Afghanistan.

D. The U.S:

American Embassy had been closed due to security reasons in January 1989. It was reopened only after the ouster of the Taliban regime in November 2001. In between, the U.S. was, of course, extending humanitarian assistance through the U.N., the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and CARE. Afghanistan had gone into oblivion after the end of the Soviet occupation in 1989, so far as the US is concerned. It was only in the mid-1990s that the U.S. intelligence community started recognizing a security threat from a few loosely affiliated groups operating in Afghanistan. Around

this time, the growing closer relations of Iran with Rabbani's Kabul regime and Hikmatyar had also created some tensions in Washington.

Benazir Bhutto had also come back to power in Pakistan. She was happy neither with Rabbani nor Hikmatyar. She came to rely on her father's old advisor for Afghan and frontier affairs, a retired military man, General Naseerullah Babar, whom she had appointed as the Minister of the Interior. It was General Babar who brought the Taliban onto the scene. Benazir Bhutto was, in fact, prepared to abandon Hikmatyar if the U.S. could extend its support in throwing out Rabbani from Kabul with the help of the Taliban. The U.S. was also fed up with the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan. Moreover, this was a time when negotiations were going on between the officials of the U.S. private company, Unocal and Delta Oil Company of California for laying a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. Nothing was final, but the U.S. State Department was aware of it. This was a huge project for which stability in Afghanistan was a must. With the initiative of Iran, Hekmatyar joined Rabbani as his Prime Minister on 26th June, 1996. The Indian Prime Minister, Deve Gowda, sent a congratulatory message to Hekmatyar on assuming the post of Prime Minister of Afghanistan. This was followed by Indian Cd'A's invitation to Hekmatyar to attend India's Independence Day celebrations in Kabul on 15th August 1996. All these developments were not liked by the U.S. It would thus be seen that there was a clear-cut American incentive for the introduction of the Taliban movement that emerged on the Afghan political scene in October 1994.

The Taliban had promised to put an end to the growing of opium in Afghanistan, disarm the armed guerillas and reunite the country under a single stable government, fight against Islamic fundamentalism and finally draw out international terrorists who had taken shelter in Afghanistan. The other two countries were Pakistan and Saudi Arabia who were most active in extending all kinds of help to the Taliban. Ultimately, they captured Kabul on 27

September 1996 and Masood's forces retreated towards Panjshir. Thus Kabul was given on a platter to the Taliban because Ahmed Shah Masood could not stop their advancement considering the fact that the Taliban were laced with a lot of modern warfare and money provided by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Moreover, Masood did not rely on Hizb-e-Islami commanders. Then, followed a period in which the U.S. had an ambivalent relationship with the Taliban not recognizing the Islamic emirate that controlled 90 per cent of Afghanistan. However, the U.S. was engaging intermittently with the Taliban authorities through intermediaries on specific issues.

There was a radical change in its thinking when it came to the attention of the U.S. that Osama bin Laden was financing some terrorist elements that had possible links to the June 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers. However, it was the bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 that brought about a significant change in the U.S. outlook towards the activities of Al Qaeda and other affiliated groups active in Afghanistan, and that they had a close alliance with the Taliban. There was substantial amount of circumstantial evidence against Osama bin Laden for his complicity in attacks on the U.S. Embassies, but the Taliban refused to either hand him over or expel him from Afghanistan. Thereafter, the U.S. also approached Pakistan, but to no avail. Sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the U.N. in August 1999 did not have much impact on the Taliban. Ultimately, the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York created an overwhelming domestic and international support. The Bush administration had little difficulty in building an international coalition. It took the U.S. less than two months to oust the Taliban from Afghanistan with the help of the Northern Alliance.⁴

4 About the presence of Islamic militants and Al Qaeda adding to hostility, it is very well covered by Savita Pandey in her article entitled 'Osama bin Laden, International Terrorism and Afghanistan.' This article also forms part of the book mentioned in above para.

Conclusion

With military support of Pakistan, financial support of Saudi Arabia and tacit approval of the US, Taliban prepared for a major offensive against Kabul. Ultimately, the capital city was taken over by the Taliban on 27 September 1996. India, however, did not recognize the Taliban regime and continued to support the Northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Massod. The regime was recognised by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It was only after 9/11 attacks and the US-led war in Afghanistan that India has restored its full diplomatic relationship with Kabul.

Both India and Afghanistan have been very close since time immemorial. Their bilateral ties had traditionally been very strong and friendly based on historical and cultural links. In fact, their relationship is not confined to the governments in New Delhi and Kabul. There has been people to people contact between the two countries. India has always stood by Afghanistan leaving apart the Taliban's period. Considering the devastation caused during the Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union and subsequent civil war among the Mujahideen, India is playing a significant role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes of Afghanistan. India's development assistance which stands at almost US dollar 2 billion is a strong signal of its abiding commitment to peace, stability and prosperity of Afghanistan. India is the largest donor to Afghanistan among the regional countries. India also believes that Afghanistan can play an important part in fostering a link between India and the Central Asian States which are full of natural resources. Over and above, there is a dire need that heavy investments made in big projects like TAPI and Chabahar are well protected from terrorists.

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