

Report

12-member Women Delegation from the Pak-Afghan Women's Forum for Peace & Democracy (PAWFPD)

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**THE INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES,
ISLAMABAD**

The Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI), Islamabad, organised an In-House meeting with a 12- member women delegation from Pak-Afghan Women's Forum for Peace & Democracy (PAWFPD) organized by the Peace, Education and Development Foundation (PEAD), an NGO based in Pakistan on August 22, 2013. The agenda of discussion at the meeting revolved around 'Pak-Afghan ties' as well as how relations could be improved between both countries through the women forum.

The participants of the Forum included Naheed Farid, member of the Afghan Parliament representing Herat, Najlla Habibyar, Chief Executive Officer of the Afghan Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Mariam Safi, Director of Strategic Studies Program at the Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO), Mahmuda Sonia Eqbal, Chief Executive Officer of PAHNA Group, Afghanistan, Razia Arefi, Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO), Makiz Nasimi, Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO), Fawzia Ihsan, and Shakila Ebrahim Khil. The Pakistani members of PAWFPD included, Samina Imtiaz, PEAD Foundation Executive Director, Salma Malik Assistant Professor, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad and Amna Sardar, Member of Khyber Paktunkhwa Provincial Assembly.

The meeting was chaired by Dr. Ahmed Rashid Malik, Senior Research Fellow, ISSI. Dr. Malik welcomed the guests and briefly talked

about the state of affairs in Afghanistan with particular emphasis on the plight and suffering of the Afghan people, which he said they have been enduring for more than two decades.

Samina Imtiaz, Executive Director Peace, Education and Development Foundation (PEAD) began by talking about the role of the PEAD as well as the Pak-Afghan Women's Forum for Peace & Democracy (PAWFPD). She opined that the main role of the Forum was to try and explore different avenues of mutual cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan with regard to women empowerment and peace and prosperity in the region. She stated that although both countries are neighbours, and share many traits in common, the civil societies/society of both countries have little or no interaction between them as there was no regular channel/forum of communication that could regularly bring the two countries, their politicians, academia, civil-society and the media together.

The Pak- Afghan Women's Forum for Peace & Democracy (PAWFPD) was initiated in November 2012 with the support of women leaders from both Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the aim of trying to remove the misperceptions each side has about one another, identify root causes of apprehensions and encourage them to engage for working out mutually beneficial common narratives on peace, terrorism and trade. The primary function of the Forum is to provide a platform to women leaders on which Pak-Afghan women can interact and communicate in order to remove misgivings, promote peace and dialogue.

This Forum also aims to sensitize and build the capacity of the women leaders on the criticality of their role to build a better understanding of the countries and people. Ms Imtiaz further went on to say that it was only through continuous engagement among key stakeholders and opinion multipliers that we can hope to help increase understanding through institutional and personal relationships. She pointed out that at the moment contacts among the Pakistani and Afghan members of the parliament, media, civil society, and academia do exist, but they do not match the daunting challenges that we all face, i.e. bridging differences through political, social and commercial relationships.

Following the introduction about PAWFPD, other members of the Forum spoke about the need to address the challenges that continue to undermine bilateral relations between the two countries.

Naheed Farid, member of the Afghan Parliament from Herat, said that many educational institutions as well as research centres in Afghanistan were very keen on establishing relations with their Pakistani counterparts and greatly appreciated the meeting with the ISSI, which she believed was an important step in the right direction. She also said that the Forum was a fairly new one and was currently in its nascent stage, but once successful, this social/development cooperation would be extended to other groups on both sides. She suggested establishment of women's think tanks, student exchanges, and business schools for women specifically. Ms

Farid also expressed her keenness for Afghan institutions to establish relations with the ISSI and said that she would soon send a formal request in this regard from the Afghan Ministry of Education.

Other members from PAWFPD talked about the pivotal role women could play in economic development and establishing peace in the region. The participants emphasized enhanced linkages between the two countries, especially people-to-people contacts in the business, political and social arena. In order to rectify the misperceptions both countries hold for one another, Ms Farid suggested that sports and cultural activities, if enhanced between both countries, could also bring the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan closer.

Issues resulting from conflict, particularly challenges faced by women were also discussed and the participants emphasized the need for bringing these women into the mainstream and said that efforts should be made to support women enterprise in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Najlla Habibyar, Chief Executive Officer of the Afghan Ministry of Commerce and Industry, emphasized on the need for both countries to develop soft borders with visa free movement of people and goods. For this purpose, she suggested that the two countries should focus on developing road and railway links. Ms Habibyar also suggested that effective measures should be taken to remove existing trade barriers, such as issues pertaining to customs clearance, payment through banks, transportation problems

that Afghan traders face etc., to increase bilateral trade. She stressed that Afghan businessmen and traders face immense difficulties at the Karachi Port and such delays gravely hinder the promotion of trade. Ms Habibyar stressed on the need for long-term collaboration for economic development that would secure the role of women beyond 2014.

Apart from civil society interaction and the role of PAWFPD, other issues pertaining to Pak-Afghan relations, the Afghan Taliban, upcoming Afghan elections and post-2014 withdrawal were also briefly touched upon. Talking about the future of Afghanistan, Ms Mariam Safi, Director of Strategic Studies Program at the Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO), said that although Afghanistan continues to face a plethora of challenges, the country has come a long way and has made important progress in many sectors. She said that PAWFPD would focus on identifying the challenges faced by the Afghan women in the Afghan Peace Process, as well as ways to include marginalized groups in the process. She highlighted the active role of Afghan women in the political process, and made special reference to the role of the High Peace Council which has a total of 70 members, 8 of whom are women, and said that any future Afghan government would only be accepted as long as it recognised the active role and rights of the Afghan women.

Sonia Eqbal, Chief Executive Officer of PAHNA Group, Afghanistan, spoke about the importance of free and fair elections with regard to the upcoming Afghan Presidential elections scheduled for April 2014. Ms Eqbal

opined that it was necessary that the Afghan government focus on the peace process and achieve concrete results before the elections, as there were rumours that if no breakthrough is achieved with the Afghan Taliban, they could sabotage the elections as well as deter the masses from voting. To this Ms Makiz Nassimi from the Afghanistan Justice Organization (AJO), added that the Afghan people want Pakistan to play a critical role in the peace process as a facilitator. Ms Nassimi concluded by saying that despite many challenges that both Afghanistan and Pakistan face, one should not lament on what we have lost in these past ten years, but see what both countries can achieve in the future.

Dr Rasul Bakhsh Rais, Director General, ISSI, concluded the meeting by thanking the PAWFPD delegation and said that Pakistan would like to contribute to the peace process as well as peace in the region, as it was not in Pakistan's interest to damage Afghanistan as a damaged Afghanistan means a damaged Pakistan. He said that focus should be made on issues that create common space rather than rough patches and that the only way to overcome the climate of suspicion and mistrust is by exploring dialogue and contact.

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