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Report – Public Talk

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His Excellency, Amir Khan Muttaqi *Interim Foreign Minister of Afghanistan*

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On November 12, 2021 the Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a Public Talk by H.E. Amir Khan Muttaqi, Interim Foreign Minister of Afghanistan under ISSI's Distinguished Lecture Series. Members of the diplomatic corps in Islamabad, academics, civil society, former and current diplomats were also present.

Ms. Amina Khan, Director Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) moderated the event.

During his welcome remarks, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that in the aftermath of the US pull-out, the manner in which the Ashraf Ghani government left, shows that they never had the support of Afghan people. Now the situation in Afghanistan is a ground reality and that there is a consensus that the people of Afghanistan want peace. If there is chaos in Afghanistan, it will lead towards terrorism and back to a chaotic situation he said. He further showed concern towards the ordinary Afghans who had suffered the most from the war in the country. Moreover, he also added that after the swift pull out of the US, the folding of Ashraf Ghani's government, and the melting of the national army shows the Taliban as a reality in Afghanistan. The ambassador further stresses upon the Taliban to engage with local Afghans in order to bring peace and stability to the country and the region at large. Similarly, the ambassador showed his keen interest in engaging with the Taliban and said that the neighbors of Afghanistan and countries like Russia, China, and the US should take all possible steps to bring peace to the country.

Mr. Muttaqi shed light on the new developments in Afghanistan and also talked about the foreign policy of Afghanistan and specifically relations with Pakistan. He said the developments in Afghanistan were peaceful due to the support of the people and in the city of Kabul not a single drop of blood was shed. He further said that with the group's takeover, there was comprehensive peace throughout Afghanistan and that the refugees coming out of Afghanistan are economic refugees as is the case in other parts of the world as well. The new government of Afghanistan does not pursue a policy of revenge. Talking about the Doha agreement, he said that we have made it clear that we will not allow the territory of Afghanistan to be used against any country, including our immediate neighbors. There exists a problem internationally in defining certain

words – one such word is terrorism. We are now pursuing a balanced policy and we do not want our country to be a ground of conflict for major powers and joint efforts can lead to stability. Due to the unique placement of Afghanistan geographically, it can serve as a point of connectivity for the entire region. We are exerting efforts to have dialogue with CARs so that trade can be resumed between Pakistan and Central Asia which will benefit Afghanistan as well. We also look forward to good bilateral trade with Pakistan. Reforms that the International community wants us to take we want to work towards them peacefully not through pressure tactics.

Moreover, Afghanistan due to its unique geography serves as a point of connectivity between the south Asian and central Asian regions. The recent development of convoys reaching from Uzbekistan to Pakistan via the Torkham border is a major step towards progress and expansion of trade and transit from Turkmenistan to Hirat enrooting Kandahar and Chaman. Furthermore, the interim foreign minister also highlighted the importance of holding talks with Pakistan for opening trade routes for Afghan traders to Karachi and other ports in order to resume trade and broaden bilateral economic partnerships. Additionally, endorsing the past and good history of the two countries the foreign minister urged them not to deteriorate the relationship based on mistakes made in the past rather work for cordial ties and promotion of peace in the region through peace in Afghanistan.

The problems faced by the new government were also highlighted by the F.M. such as the economic drain by the previous regime including the bills of electricity imported from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Tajikistan since 2001. Moreover, Mr. Muttaqi also mentioned how the Taliban were previously regarded as terrorists and were either killed or sent to Guantanamo bay but the US forces, but now the same Taliban have captured Kabul without a single drop of bloodshed and are protecting the people who mistreated them earlier, yet they remain as terrorists in the eyes of the international community.

Besides this, about 500,000 civil servants were working under the previous government and were unpaid for months and the new government of Taliban has now started paying them their due salaries. Similarly, the interim foreign minister also mentioned that since coming to power no

official from a junior to a senior level post is removed based on their political views and opposition to the new government.

In addition to this, the unfreezing of assets by the international community and humanitarian assistance was demanded by the interim foreign minister, as he mentioned that the Taliban were cooperative with the US in the Doha Agreement. Furthermore, the issue of inclusivity in political arenas by the international community was also emphasized upon by the F.M. His Excellency highlighted that the Afghan cabinet fulfills the criteria as the participation of different ethnicities including the Uzbeks, the Tajiks, the Baloch, the Nuristani, Turkmen, and the Hazaras in the government.

He said Afghanistan for the first time in forty-three years has a central, responsible and sovereign government which controls every inch of the territory of Afghanistan. We, in Afghanistan have a historic opportunity to create a win-win situation for everyone. The new developments have opened new opportunities for stability as the backbone of prosperity. A lot of things are coming out of the international media with the intention of destroying our image. 500,000 civil servants who were previously not being paid for months are now being paid. We have not fired anyone due to their political views. He also stated that not a single woman has been fired or their salaries cut. Afghanistan has around 3000 clinics and hospitals which are still running today. Aid has been cut by 'International human rights champions' and the assets of people of Afghanistan—their basic source of sustenance – have also been frozen. There no longer exists any rationale behind any such sanctions. The international community wants us to build an inclusive government- our current cabinet fulfils that requirement – we have representatives from all ethnicities. We are being punished for something which is a possibility in the future, he concluded.

The talk was followed by a discussion moderated by Ambassador Chaudhry. During the question-answer session, a question was raised on the involvement of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan in local peace building in order to develop people to people relationships. In response to this question, the F.M. appreciated Pakistan for hosting Afghan refugees for more than forty years and highlighted the importance of 2500 kilometer long border helping in transforming the relationships through local businesses by the Afghan refugees.

Responding to a question regarding women's rights and education, he said that more than 75 percent of girls have returned to school and while the focus of the international community on women education there is very little focus on the teachers who need to be paid, hence this appears to be quite contradictory in part of the international community.

Similarly, upon the question of violation of human rights, the F.M. responded that the new government has not taken any action against any political opposition and is abiding by the convention of human rights not to associate political differences with human rights and humanitarian crisis. Therefore, the international community is not considering the Afghan crisis as a major humanitarian crisis and the aid which is being provided is not enough to cater to this huge humanitarian crisis.

Furthermore, Mr. Muttaqi ensured that the new government will coordinate and cooperate with the international community to overcome the crisis but would not consider being pressurized under any sort of political or strategic tactics. Moreover, a comprehensive approach should be adopted as seen previously coercive tactics have not yielded any results in the past twenty years.

Moreover, upon the establishment of an official and permanent government, Mr. Muttaqi highlighted the important developmental initiatives taken by the government contributing to inclusivity. Unlike the previous government, the new government is trying to cater to the needs of the local people as well as to meet the demands of the international community. However, the minister mentioned that the new government would keep its national interests as the foremost priority rather than just catering to the demands of the international community.

Similarly, in response to the question about the reopening of the secondary schools for girls the foreign minister said that progress is being made regarding resuming girls' education and the process will take place in three phases. Moreover, Mr. Muttaqi also shed light on the delay in resuming girls' education as he mentioned 200,000 teachers associated with the education sector and the current government requires assistance in providing salaries to the teachers to ensure smooth working of educational institutes in the country.

There is a consensus in Afghanistan and the entire region that whichever government is in power with the support of the people of Afghanistan is in the interest of all. There remain no anti-Pak

elements in Afghanistan and that we are trying our best that the territory of Afghanistan not be used against anyone and that peace should prevail.

The talk concluded with Chairman BOG, ISSI Ambassador Khalid Mahmood presenting the Institute's shield to the distinguished guest.