



**SRSB BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL**

**Briefing to the United Nations Security Council  
by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva  
New York, 26 September 2023**

[As delivered]

Mr. President,

When former Secretary-General Kofi Annan was given the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2001, he began his address with these words: "Today in Afghanistan a girl will be born."

Who is she now? Is she a university student forced into exile in order to continue her education? Is she a qualified professional, who a few months ago had a career but is now confined to her home? Or is she like the young woman that a UNAMA team met in southwestern Afghanistan recently: the daughter of a widowed mother, a girl who had never gone to school because of the conflict, and whose main concern every day is finding enough water for her family? These brief examples describe the dilemmas and complexities in Afghanistan today. There are no easy answers.

Afghan communities, to take the last example, are being ravaged by the effects of three years of drought. In a country where nearly eighty percent of the population depends on agriculture, climate change and the lack of water are having devastating effects on people's lives. Afghans in water scarce areas say that if they don't have water everything else is secondary. A *de facto* provincial governor referred to what he termed as "upside down migration": where families who have everything but water migrate to where they have nothing but water.

Mr. President,

With regard to human rights, since my last briefing UNAMA has issued three human rights reports: one, the impact of improvised explosive devices on civilians; the second one is on the violations of the *de facto* authorities' own declared amnesty regarding former government officials and the third former armed force members; and the third, the treatment of detainees. These reports have documented human rights violations by the *de facto* authorities in contravention of international law. In many cases they are violations of the Taliban leader's own instructions, for example on the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment. Such violations create fear and distrust that undermine the claims of domestic legitimacy by the *de facto* authorities.

I acknowledge the cooperative responses of the *de facto* authorities through the *de facto* Ministry of Foreign Affairs to our reports before they are published. Their written responses can be found annexed to each of these reports.

UNAMA's human rights efforts are focused on engaging and enabling the *de facto* authorities to establish an inclusive, responsive system of governance, including policing, that respects human rights norms and standards. It is time to support strengthened engagement with the relevant components of the *de facto* authorities through appropriate means to increase their knowledge and further compliance of law enforcement actions with international norms.

In this regard, we welcome the recent visit of a group of distinguished Islamic scholars from member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The delegation of Ulemas focused on girls' education, women's rights, and the need for inclusive governance, stressing that these were integral to Islamic governance around the world. We urge that these visits continue. They are part of a vital conversation between the *de facto* authorities and the international community helpfully mediated by the Islamic world.

Mr. President,

At the subnational level, UNAMA has documented many instances of consultations between the *de facto* authorities and local communities. These consultations are both through institutions and ad hoc. Very recently, Provincial Ulema Councils composed of religious clerics and tribal elders have been created in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. These councils are intended to provide accountability and listen to local grievances, but they also report directly to the Taliban leader. It is too early to judge these institutions, whether they are instruments of accountability and consultation or of control. We are concerned that the recently created Provincial Ulema Council for the predominantly Shia provinces of Bamyan and Daikundi have no Shia members.

At the end of this month there will be a Moscow format meeting in Kazan, Russia, which will focus on inclusive government. The *de facto* authorities will send a delegation headed by the *de facto* Foreign Minister. Despite insistence by the *de facto* authorities that their institutions are inclusive, there appears to be a growing legitimacy gap with the people. The lack of certainty regarding rights, accountability, representation, and recourse to justice remains a significant obstacle to internal legitimacy. And there cannot be international legitimacy without domestic legitimacy.

On a positive note, there is growing evidence that the *de facto* authorities have significantly reduced the cultivation of poppy in Afghanistan. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime will report on this in great detail in October. The world can benefit from this decision which has affected the livelihoods of thousands of Afghan farmers. UNAMA has established in Kabul a working group of countries that are coordinating their efforts to provide specific assistance to these farmers as well as to the millions of Afghans who have become addicts as a result of the demand for these drugs in faraway countries. Today in Istanbul donors are meeting on Afghanistan. We will reiterate our requests to provide enhanced assistance to these communities.

In the meantime, we are greatly concerned by the humanitarian funding gap. As of one week ago, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan had received US \$872 million, approximately only 28 per cent of the \$3.2 billion requested. Many programmes have already closed due to insufficient funding just as winter is fast approaching and lives are most at risk. This means that 15.2 million Afghans now facing acute food insecurity could be pushed towards famine in the coming months. I urge donors to heed our humanitarian appeal with as much generosity as possible before winter comes.

More sustainable and cost-effective means of providing assistance are also required. We urge donors to consider funding Basic Human Needs assistance in line with the UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan with a view to sustaining essential services, strengthening livelihoods and promoting community resilience to benefit the most vulnerable, including women, displaced people and returnees.

Mr. President,

Since 2022, this Council has mandated UNAMA to carry out an engagement strategy that seeks to moderate the policies of the *de facto* authorities and bring Afghanistan into convergence with international norms. On the ground, the *de facto* authorities with whom we are in constant contact demonstrate an openness to continue this engagement, even as we continue to disagree profoundly—and we express these disagreements in our meetings—on issues such as the rights of women and girls and the need for more inclusive governance.

But I am increasingly concerned about what can only be described as a lack of positive direction in our engagement. If this drift continues, we will neither be able to address the concerns of the international community, nor the *de facto* administration, nor above all the significant needs of the Afghan people.

It is well known that our engagement strategy has been significantly undermined by the more than 50 decrees the Taliban have issued aimed at eliminating women from public life and education. The two speakers after me, UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous and Ms. Karima Bennouna will speak in far greater detail on the devastating effects that these edicts have on the lives of Afghan women.

UNAMA, in conjunction with UN Women and IOM, has just published its fourth quarterly report on the situation of Afghan women based on more than 500 interviews. Among other findings, 46 per cent of women stated that the Taliban should not be recognized under any circumstances. This further undermines the *de facto* authorities' claim to domestic legitimacy.

The policies that drive the exclusion of women are unacceptable to the international community. We all recognize this, especially myself, as a woman from the region, who has to deal each day with the ongoing effects of the ban on Afghan women, including those banned from working from our premises.

The question, however, is whether to continue engaging with the *de facto* authorities despite these policies, or to cease engaging because of them. UNAMA's view is that we must continue to engage and to maintain a dialogue. Dialogue is not recognition. Engagement is not acceptance of these policies. On the contrary: dialogue and engagement are how we are attempting to change these policies.

The goal of our engagement continues to be to promote governance practices that reflect international norms as well as Afghanistan's cultural and religious heritage. This engagement could benefit by being more structured and purposeful while remaining principled. A reframed engagement strategy must first acknowledge that the *de facto* authority bears responsibility for the well-being of the Afghan people, in all dimensions but especially concerning women. A reframed engagement strategy must also have mechanisms to address the *de facto* authorities' long-standing concerns. And it should include an intra-Afghan dialogue of the sort that was interrupted when the Taliban took power in August 2021. Such an engagement would also require a more coordinated position of the international community. We look forward to the report of the Special Coordinator and his observations on this and other issues.

Mr. President,

The lack of trust on all sides is a serious impediment to building confidence but the doors to dialogue are still open. Afghanistan has been a country in conflict for nearly half a century. This moment, despite its problems, is an opportunity. We must ensure that the doors to dialogue are not shut.

After all, today in Afghanistan hundreds of girls will be born. They should not be born into poverty, exclusion, discrimination, or hopelessness. They should be able to contribute to the full potential of a peaceful Afghanistan that is not isolated from the world community.

Thank you.

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