



**Briefing to the United Nations Security Council  
by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ms. Deborah Lyons**

**New York, 17 November 2021**

*[as delivered]*

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Mr. President,

Thank you so much for this opportunity and thank you to the Council members for the opportunity to speak to you about Afghanistan at this very critical time.

For the past twenty years the needs of Afghanistan have been discussed and acted on in this chamber with particular sympathy and generosity. But with the Taliban takeover, the Afghan people now feel abandoned, forgotten, and indeed punished by circumstances that are not their fault. To abandon the Afghan people now would be a historic mistake—a mistake that has been made before with tragic consequences.

I would like to begin by providing first a general assessment of the de facto Taliban administration based on our engagement with them in Kabul and through the provinces over the past three months.

Let me highlight that our formal interactions have been generally useful and constructive. The de facto authorities have assured us that they want a UN presence, and they value our assistance. They continue to seek international recognition as well as ways to overcome the major trust deficit that they recognize exists between them and the international community. In terms of governance, they have begun to raise revenues from customs and have used some of these revenues to begin addressing pressing issues such as paying partially the civil service salaries.

As well, the Taliban continue to provide security to the United Nations presence throughout the country and allow broad humanitarian access, including for female humanitarian workers. This changed security situation has allowed us to visit parts of the country that we have not visited in fifteen years, providing vital assistance.

And, Mr. President, be assured that we have not shied away from raising difficult issues with the Taliban, particularly on ethnic rights, women's rights, girls' education, inclusivity, and on reports we have heard of harassment and extra-judicial killings. In general, they have taken cognizance of these concerns and have often acknowledged that they have made mistakes and are trying to address them. However, they also make clear that for now there are limits to concessions they are willing to make on certain issues.

On girls' education the de facto authorities have indicated they are working on a nation-wide policy so that the right to girls' education can be exercised across the country, but they state that they need more time to clarify the policy and its implementation. While the de facto authorities had initially assured the protection of women's rights within Islamic law, including



education, there has been a general curtailment of Afghan women and girls' fundamental rights and freedoms. These range from limiting their right to work to the absence of women from major decision-making fora and from senior echelons of the civil service. It should be noted that these policies are applied disparately around the country, with some provinces becoming significantly less restrictive than others.

We continue to call for a more inclusive administration, in which government institutions reflect Afghanistan's broad diversity. We have seen limited progress on this issue, however. The composition of the caretaker cabinet, so called by the Taliban themselves, the composition of this cabinet remains entirely male, essentially Pashtun, and almost all Taliban. At both the capital and provincial levels recent appointments continue to appear designed more to rewarding fighters than promoting governance and inclusion.

Also, be assured, Mr. President and Council members, that we maintain close contacts as well with other sectors of Afghan society around the country, including media, former government officials, civil society, professionals, and yes, most certainly, women's groups. Afghans in general remain apprehensive about the future intentions of the Taliban de facto authority. These apprehensions mitigate some of the relief that has come from the notable decline of conflict. They are of course hugely concerned, the Afghan population, about the paralyzed economy, the inability to withdraw money, and fears of not being able to feed themselves and their children during the winter and coming months.

There are also limitations on demonstrations and other attempts at freedom of expression. Media outlets continue to close sometimes due to financial reasons and sometimes other ongoing restrictions by the de facto authorities on the content of their publications and broadcasts. Continued inter-ethnic tension and violence, give rise as well to concern for minority rights with reports of forced evictions targeting minority communities.

Mr. President,

Let me say that while the overall security situation has indeed improved, as the conflict has largely ended we regularly receive credible reports of incidents impacting the right to life and physical integrity of Afghans. These include house searches and extra-judicial killings of former government security personnel and officials. The judicial system itself is unevenly applied the availability of judges, civil servants, police personnel and legal and financial resources vary across the country. There are no women working in the justice sector and it remains unclear how the de facto authorities intend to assure and ensure women's access to justice.

Another major negative development has been the Taliban's inability to stem the expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and in Levant Khorasan Province. Once limited to a few provinces and Kabul, ISILKP now seems to be present in nearly all provinces and increasingly active. The number of attacks has increased significantly, from last year to this year. In 2020 – 60, so far this year – 334 attacks attributed to ISILKP or, in fact, claimed by ISILKP. ISILKP continues to target the Shi'ite communities. The Taliban insist that they are waging a concerted campaign against ISILKP, but this campaign is worrying in that it appears to rely heavily on extra-judicial detentions and killings of suspected ISILKP members. This is an area deserving more attention from the international community.

My general impression is that the Taliban however is making genuine efforts to present itself as a government. These efforts are partly constrained by the lack of resources and capacity, as



well as a political ideology that in many ways clashes with contemporary international norms of governance so present in this chamber. The Taliban have not yet established full trust with much of the Afghan population or convinced them of their capacity to govern. The movement is also struggling to manage some serious internal divisions. Ultimately, however, the Taliban must decide on whether to govern according to the needs and the rights of the diverse Afghan population, or whether to rule on the basis of a narrow ideology and an even narrower ethnic base.

Mr. President,

Since the Taliban took power, members of the international community have focused understandably on helping those Afghans who want to leave. Widespread fears of life under the Taliban rule prompted the horrific scenes that everyone witnessed in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover in August as thousands of Afghans chose to flee the country. But our attention now must turn to the vastly greater number of Afghans who remain in the country but face in a short term a most dire future.

We are on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe that is preventable. The financial sanctions applied to Afghanistan have paralyzed the banking system, affecting every aspect of the economy. GDP has contracted by an estimated 40 percent. Cash is severely limited. Traders cannot obtain letters of credit. People who have worked and saved for years cannot access their savings. Civil servants' salaries cannot be paid in full, if at all. Hospitals are running out of medicine and turning away patients. Prices have gone up as goods have become scarcer, instituting a punishing tax on the poorest and most vulnerable Afghans. Fuel and food prices have risen as winter approaches. An entire complex social and economic system is shutting down in part due to the asset freeze, the suspension of non-humanitarian aid flows and sanctions.

According to a recent UN report, almost one in two Afghans face crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. One in two of a population of some 38 million. As we move into winter and households consume their very limited food stocks we fear and predict that up to 23 million Afghans will be in crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. This will likely worsen indeed over the winter making Afghanistan the country with the largest population in the world facing the greatest risk of food insecurity. Further, while the risk of famine was once mostly in rural areas, ten out of eleven of Afghanistan's most densely populated urban areas are now anticipated to be equally at emergency levels of food insecurity.

Against tremendous constraints but backed by the incredible generosity of the many donors, we are delivering significant amounts of humanitarian aid. We, as UNAMA and the many UN agencies functioning in Afghanistan are grateful to the donors who have now almost fully funded the September flash appeal. By the third quarter of this year, the United Nations humanitarian organizations and their accompanying NGOs, have reached close to 10 and a half million people with assistance across the country. This includes food assistance, agriculture and livelihood assistance, treatment for acute malnutrition of children, medical consultations, and water trucking to reach thousands of drought-affected people. As I am sure all of you know Afghanistan has faced this year the second drought in four years again anticipating another drought year in years to come.

The support cannot stop here. My key message, is that humanitarian assistance is not enough. The international community needs urgently to find a way to provide financial support to health care workers in state hospitals, staff in food security programmes, and yes eventually to



teachers provided that girls' right to education is emphatically met. This can only be done through the institutions and delivery mechanisms that have been built at great cost over the past two decades. With the contribution of many of the countries present here. I want to assure you that every effort will be made by the UN to ensure that funds provided through these delivery mechanisms will not be diverted to nor by the Taliban. We have created an independent facility for the payment of salaries in the health sector but this needs to be expanded and replicated to many other essential service areas. We will need intense dialogue with the donors on these issues.

We must focus for the next three or four months on helping the most vulnerable Afghans endure the winter, and we must do so without undermining the institutions and coping mechanisms that are keeping the rest of the population from sliding into greater vulnerability.

Mr. President, on another disturbing note.

I must report that the reality of the current situation threatens to heighten the risk of extremism. The continued deterioration of the formal economy will provide impetus to the informal economy, including illicit drugs, arms flows and human trafficking. The ongoing paralysis of the banking sector will push more of the financial system into unaccountable and unregulated informal money exchanges which can only help facilitate terrorism, trafficking, and further drug smuggling.

These pathologies will first affect Afghanistan but then they will infect the region. Regional countries have created or continued various important formats of support. Both the Moscow format meetings and the so-called "Troika plus", involving China, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States, have continued to meet. As well, I'm happy to report two meetings have been held, in Islamabad and Tehran – and I believe the next one will be in Beijing – in the new format of meetings of foreign minister of Afghanistan neighbours. India also recently hosted a conference of some regional countries at the National Security Advisor level. All indications of how strongly the regional countries are stepping up at this critical time.

All of these formats rightly stress the need for stability in Afghanistan as well as the urgent requirement to combat illegal drug-trafficking and transnational terrorism. Regional countries, like the rest of the international community have called for a more inclusive government in Afghanistan as well as the need for girls' education, women returning to work, respect for human rights and the rights of minorities. On these issues there is a strong regional and international consensus. The world is speaking with one voice to the Taliban on these issues.

Mr. President,

The problems of Afghanistan are not limited to the region. The best way to promote stability and future international support is for the Taliban to avoid the isolation that characterised their previous experience in power. This will require a sustained and structured policy dialogue between the Taliban de facto authorities, other Afghan stakeholders and the wider region and international community. UNAMA is well positioned to play a vital role in this important dialogue depending on our future mandate. The goal should be to establish a gradual but concerted pathway spelling out concrete steps for establishing constructive relations between Afghanistan and the world at large, with the well-being and rights of the Afghan people being the central goal of all of these efforts.

This is, to be frank, the only way to avoid losing much of the progress of the last 20 years.



Such a roadmap, such a pathway, and continued engagement would pave the way for more constructive exchanges on a wide variety of international priorities including on the de facto authorities responsibilities to the people of Afghanistan to implement the obligations of so many treaty bodies supported by this chamber and to which the Afghan state is a party.

Mr. President and Council Members,

I know that no one can guarantee that all of these measures [inaudible] will ensure a better future for the Afghan people but we can guarantee that without making these concerted efforts their lives will most certainly worsen. This is not the time to turn our backs on the Afghan people. If we do, our collective failure will resonate for decades—as will the pain of millions of Afghans.

Thank you for your time.

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