



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

*[as delivered]*

**New York, 17 December 2020**

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Thank you, Mr. President,

Good morning, good evening, Council members.

I am addressing the Council as we close on one of the most momentous years Afghans have endured.

Since my last briefing, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban have made incremental, but genuine progress in their peace talks. On 2 December, the two parties announced that they had agreed to the "rules and procedures" for negotiations. The two sides then formed a working committee to discuss the agenda, and both parties presented to one another an initial list of topics for discussion. These developments are an early, but a positive sign that both sides are willing and able to compromise when needed.

Earlier this week, following ninety-three days of uninterrupted talks, the parties agreed to take a twenty-day recess. We hope that this will allow both sides to regroup, to consult internally and externally, and to resume negotiating with a renewed commitment. The parties have committed indeed to return to the negotiating table on 5 January, after this short three-week break.

Along with members of our humanitarian, development and human rights teams, I have visited Doha twice recently to meet with both Afghan parties, and, of course, members of the diplomatic community. I should note that on each trip to Doha, I have met with the women negotiators to seek their views on how we can help. And UNAMA also retains a team on the ground in Doha, working alongside the parties and members of the international community to support the process.

So, I want to thank the State of Qatar for hosting the talks, as well as the United States and members of the host country support group – Germany, Indonesia, Norway, and Uzbekistan - for their diplomatic efforts. I look forward to further constructive engagement by the larger international community in the various existing and developing formats to further enlarge the support to the peace process.

Mr. President,

Any sustainable peace will need to be owned by Afghanistan's very diverse society. This is only possible if the process is inclusive from the outset, with meaningful participation by all constituencies, including women, youth, minorities, victims of conflict and religious leaders.



The recent formation of the High Council for National Reconciliation will allow the Islamic Republic to establish a broad base for consolidating its negotiating positions. The Taliban, too, must expand and broaden their consultations with Afghan constituencies.

One of the key constituencies for both negotiating parties must be Afghanistan's youth. Two-thirds of Afghan citizens are below the age of 25. This is also the most educated generation of youth in Afghanistan's history. Young Afghans have clear views on the future of their country, and we must do all we can to amplify their voices. And so, I am delighted that Shkula Zadran, Afghanistan's Youth Representative, will join us here today, and I look forward to hearing her thoughts, once again.

I am proud to say that through our youth-focused local peace initiatives, which are conducted throughout Afghanistan, UNAMA has provided a platform for the youth of Afghanistan to have their say on peace. Most recently, in the rural province of Faryab, young participants issued their own declaration with strong recommendations specifying an immediate ceasefire; setting out the role of Islam under Afghanistan's Constitution; identifying the all-important Sustainable Development Goals; and emphasizing the need for transitional justice. These are the young people of Afghanistan. Their voices deserve to be heard.

Mr. President,

As we all know, cooperation throughout the region, Central and South Asia, will be essential to an enduring peace. Increased trade and connectivity will build the foundation for peace and regional prosperity. It is therefore important to support regional efforts, and I particularly want to take note today of the regional efforts on counter-narcotics and transnational organized crime – two serious threats to the countries in the regions – and I want to highlight that these topics were part of a major discussion that I participated in with UNODC's regional Steering Committee Meeting, which is made up of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Addressing these issues, and the incredible destructive impact on Afghanistan the people of the region, will be essential in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan and in the region.

During my recent visits to Iran and Pakistan, and participating in events hosted by the Government of Turkmenistan and UNRCCA, I am happy to say that I have noted an increasing commitment among regional players to making peace in Afghanistan a reality, as well as the critical recognition that regional stability does indeed require an enduring peace in Afghanistan.

Mr. President,

Regrettably, the unrelenting violence remains a serious obstacle to peace and a threat to the region. I will admit that we are still compiling this year's data, but I would like to mention a few provisional statistics on the impact of the violence.

In October and November, improvised explosive devices, IEDs, caused over 60 per cent more civilian casualties than in the same period last year. In the third quarter of 2020, child casualties rose 25 per cent over the previous three months, while attacks against schools in the same period increased four-fold. In the first 11 months of 2020, targeted killings by anti-government elements rose by nearly 40 per cent compared to the same period in 2019.



It is no surprise then, that the Global Peace Index for 2020 ranked Afghanistan as the least peaceful country in the world for the second year in a row.

Such a ranking illustrates the psychological impact of the violence: as one Afghan official told me recently, “the sense and perception of violence and insecurity is higher now than ever.” Let me say that again: the sense and perception of violence and insecurity is higher now than ever. Since the start of November alone, two separate rocket attacks in Kabul; the attack on Kabul University, the increased conflict in Helmand and Kandahar, and a brutal bombing in Bamyan, to name but a few, have strained the public’s already fragile confidence, and exacerbated the fears around the emergence of new terrorist threats. I ask all countries to continue to pressure all parties to the conflict to bring about a sustained reduction in violence, and I expect this will be a top priority when the negotiations resume.

The ongoing security transition, coupled with the emerging reality of international troop withdrawals, have obviously added to the anxieties felt by the Afghan population. In the coming months, I anticipate that this larger security transition will become a central topic in the dialogue amongst Afghan officials, regional countries, and the larger international community.

And yet, Mr. President, at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference in Geneva, the international community came together to reaffirm its financial support to Afghanistan. The conference exceeded expectations, and I congratulate our co-hosts, the Governments of Afghanistan and Finland, for making it a success. The generous pledges, remarkable in today’s fiscal environment, will enable Afghanistan to pursue its core development priorities, and deliver vital services to its people.

But it is not just about the money. It was also about a very important dialogue. UNAMA convened three high-level meetings: one on regional cooperation; another on the peace-security-development-humanitarian nexus – this complex Rubik’s cube that we will have to understand as we move forward to face the challenges of the coming year; and, of course, a high-level event participated in by Afghan private sector to discuss how they move towards self-reliance in this new peace environment. These events brought a diverse range of voices to Geneva, addressing the challenges of governance and economic growth.

But above all, the conference sent a clear signal to the people of Afghanistan: the international community still stands with you. Adopted by no less than 66 countries, the conference communiqué reaffirmed support for – and I quote – “a unified, sovereign, peaceful and democratic Afghanistan”. Signed by 66 countries. And then three days later, this message was echoed at the Council of Foreign Ministers meeting of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation in Niger, where member states committed to “helping Afghanistan achieve a lasting peace, sustainable development, rehabilitation and reconstruction.” They also once again called for a ceasefire.

It is important to note, however, that donors have made clear that their generous financial assistance comes with conditions. A short year from now, we will all gather again, the Government and the donors, at a Senior Officials Meeting to assess progress against these pledges. Sustaining the current level of funding will require tangible improvements, on peace, governance, the rule of law, certainly anti-corruption, and human rights, especially women’s rights.



There is no time to lose, and it is not business as usual. And so, we have begun to work with the Afghan Government and development partners to galvanize the reform priorities. Together, we can ensure – and will ensure – that donors’ assistance serves its intended purpose: building strong and accountable institutions; delivering services to the Afghan people.

And yet Mr. President,

Unfortunately, Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, and I want to take note of that today. Six have lost their lives, this year alone – six journalists – with scant accountability for perpetrators. Eleven human rights defenders have also lost their lives, and many more have been injured or continue to be threatened.

Such attacks are completely unjustifiable. They risk chilling the public discourse, just when dialogue is most needed. So, I call upon the Government to take effective measures to protect the media, and to investigate and prosecute violent crimes against journalists. The Taliban, too, must refrain from attacking civilian targets. The Taliban must recognise the critical role that the media and civil society fulfils in a modern-day Afghanistan, as a vital member of global community.

Mr. President,

Like much of the world, Afghanistan is now facing a new wave of COVID-19. Already, the effects of this pandemic have been devastating. And we are moving into a winter second phase which is likely to be much more damaging than the spring first wave. Hunger and malnutrition have spiked, and livelihoods have been eroded, with women and children particularly affected.

And so, in coordination with the Government and civil society, the larger UN family has scaled up to ensure that work is getting done to respond to the pandemic. Just this week, the President and I, have launched and will be heading up an emergency SWAT team to oversee the [inaudible] on a daily basis. I encourage the member states to fund humanitarian activities generously. We must ensure that Afghanistan’s most vulnerable people are not left further behind in this pandemic.

Mr. President,

As the year draws to a close, we must acknowledge that 2020 has brought a profound shift for this country, with the US-Taliban agreement, with the US-Afghan Government joint declaration, with three months of intra-Afghan negotiations, with the renewal of pledges from international donors, and with a revitalised regional cooperation effort. All under a new government in Kabul.

By all accounts, Mr President, this was a big year.

But a bigger year lies ahead – a full security transition, peace negotiations that must and will advance, the health and socio-economic challenges of COVID, the ongoing commitment of the international donors, and the expected results of even more regional cooperation. All of this with whatever political and societal changes come from it.

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Clearly Afghanistan will continue to move forward in this new year; but equally will continue to need the dedicated support of this Council.

Thank you and I look forward to our discussion.

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*UNAMA supports the Afghan people and government to achieve peace and stability. In accordance with its mandate as a political mission, UNAMA backs conflict prevention and resolution, promoting inclusion and social cohesion, as well as strengthening regional cooperation. The Mission supports effective governance, promoting national ownership and accountable institutions that are built on respect for human rights. UNAMA provides 'good offices' and other key services, including diplomatic steps that draw on the organization's independence, impartiality and integrity to prevent disputes from arising, escalating or spreading. The Mission coordinates international support for Afghan development and humanitarian priorities.*