



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

Kabul, 22 June 2021

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Madame President,

I welcome the level of interest on Afghanistan, as shown by this meeting taking place at a Foreign Minister level today. There could be no better time for this attention.

I cannot overstate to the Council my concern regarding the present situation in Afghanistan. All of the major trends—politics, security, the peace process, the economy, the humanitarian emergency, and COVID—all of these trends are negative or stagnant. If there is a sense of hope it indeed resides in a fact that previous worse case predictions did not materialize. But the relentless spirit of the Afghans and their incredible resilience is being severely tested and the possible slide toward dire scenarios is undeniable. What happens in Afghanistan remains of global consequence and the Security Council needs to be fully informed of the gravity of the present situation.

The mid-April announcement that all international troops will be withdrawn in the coming months sent a seismic tremor through the Afghan political system and society at large. The withdrawal decision was expected but its speed—with the majority of troops now already withdrawn—was not. All actors have had to adjust to this new, reality that is unfolding.

The withdrawal is one of four parts of the February 2020 agreement between the US and the Taliban that has indeed been acknowledged by this Council. The agreement generated hope that it would create the space for a peace to be made among Afghans. The foreign troops would be gone, and therefore, rather than fighting one another, Afghans would have the opportunity to come together and find a path to peace. But instead, actions on the battlefield have been far greater than progress at the negotiating table.

And at this critical time, the Afghan public and the diplomatic community in Kabul have been alarmed at the lack of political unity among Afghanistan's political elite. While some of the shortcomings in Government are part of a legacy of putting politics above governance, the lack of unity must be addressed or risks contributing to further Taliban territorial advances. We are cautiously encouraged, however, by recent moves by President Ghani and his government and the other political leaders to come together to discuss pressing security issues and demonstrate unity. The real test will though be on whether unity in Kabul serves to further reinforce the peace process and strengthen state institutions.

Madame President,

The Council has heard me speak of the continuous increase in violence over the past year, even as the peace talks began in Doha in September. The Taliban's recent advances are even more significant and are as a result of an intensified military campaign. More than 50 of Afghanistan's 370 districts have fallen since the beginning of May. Most districts that have



been taken surround provincial capitals, suggesting that the Taliban are positioning themselves to try and take these capitals once foreign forces are fully withdrawn. This military campaign runs directly counter to recent statements by the head of the Taliban Political Commission that, and I quote, “We are committed to forging ahead with the other sides in an atmosphere of mutual respect and reach an agreement.”

For the Taliban to continue this intensive military campaign would be a tragic course of action. It would lead to increased and prolonged violence that would extend the suffering of the Afghan people and threaten to destroy much of what has been built and hard won in the past 20 years. It should be emphatically clear that any efforts to install a militarily imposed government in Kabul would go against the will of the Afghan people, and against the stated positions of the regional countries and the broader international community.

We had hoped, Madame President, to accelerate the stalled negotiations at Doha through a conference in Istanbul in April that would have been co-hosted by Turkey, Qatar and the United Nations. The Republic’s team was prepared to attend the conference; however, the Taliban never did officially respond to the invitation. UNAMA continues to work within our mandate and, in cooperation with Member States, to find ways to move forward in the negotiations. But the drivers of conflict seem for now to overwhelm the reasonable and hoped-for modalities of negotiation.

Madame President,

Even without the conflict dynamics I have described, Afghanistan would be a country facing multiple crises. Almost one-third of Afghans face emergency levels of food insecurity, while this year’s drought worsens, and internal displacements increase. The World Bank has estimated that as a result of the conflict, and the severe third wave of COVID, the drought, the weakened social fabric, and other factors, Afghanistan’s poverty rate could rise from 50 percent to more than 70 percent. This frightening prospect highlights the importance of humanitarian aid provided from all countries. However, in spite of recent contributions, the US\$1.3 billion humanitarian appeal for 2021 is still only 30 percent funded.

Madame President,

As always, it is ordinary Afghans who pay the heaviest price. As fighting intensifies, the situation for civilians is ever-worsening. Civilian casualties increased by 29 per cent in the first quarter of 2021 compared to the same period last year. Notably, and sadly women casualties increased by 37 per cent and child casualties by 23 per cent. Parties must immediately take steps to further implement civilian protection measures. Civilians are deliberately and routinely targeted in clear violation of the International Humanitarian Law.

Given the enormous suffering, UNAMA stresses the importance of putting victims and their needs at the forefront of the peace negotiations. This must include specific protections for minorities. The ongoing, frequent attacks against the Hazara community in Kabul are a terrible reminder of how the overall conflict is being used to target certain groups.

Madame President,



As this council knows, preserving the rights of women remains a paramount concern and must not be used as a bargaining chip at the negotiating table. Men's rights are not negotiable. Women's rights are not negotiable. Human rights are not negotiable. Who knows this better than this Council? The international community and the regional countries, in particular, must reiterate the importance of these rights in the peace negotiations.

Afghanistan's young people –now the most educated generation in the history of the country – are being deprived of their future; a future, which they are seeking to build through education to contribute to their country's development. Instead, they are drawn into war.

Let me illustrate with three examples. Amid the rising violence, three attacks stand out that expose the tragic nature of this conflict and the heightened urgency of ending it. First of all, was the 8 May attack on girls who were making their way home after a day at school in a majority-Hazara area of Kabul that killed nearly 100 young female students. The conscience of the world was rightly shocked. Grown men with bombs attacked little girls with schoolbooks. Earlier this month, 11 humanitarian deminers were killed and 15 injured in Baghlan province. A week later, in individual but coordinated attacks in Nangarhar targeted polio vaccinators, killing five and injuring more. These are not just attacks against the individuals, but these are attacks against the very future of Afghanistan—against girls who want to educate themselves, against experienced deminers who simply want to clear the land to allow people to farm without fear, and against vaccinators risking their lives to combat the scourge of polio so Afghan children don't suffer.

So, Madame President, what is to be done?

There is still time, barely but still time, to prevent the worse-case scenario from materializing. Enough has been built in Afghanistan to allow further building—if only there can be peace. One of UNAMA's key objectives during this period of uncertainty is to continue to work with all partners to ensure the continuity of those institutions that support the well-being of all Afghans. Any future government that results from a negotiation cannot start from nothing. It is my sincere hope that the Taliban understand this as much as the government in Kabul does.

UNAMA has also heard, Madame President, the many voices that are urging us to play a greater role in the peace process and we are prepared and equipped to do so if the parties commit to real negotiations and agree together, together agree, on a role for the UN.

We are also working more closely and intensely with the regional countries. In my discussions within the region over the past year, and particularly at the recent Heart of Asia summit in Dushanbe, it was clear that the regional countries share grave concerns about an extended and fragmented conflict in Afghanistan. These concerns include refugee flows, migrant movement, increased drug smuggling, terrorism, and lost opportunities for economic connectivity and mutually beneficial trade. But these problems will not be relegated to the region alone. As we have all painfully learned, a fragmented conflict creates a more permissive environment for terrorist groups to recruit, finance, plan, and conduct operations with a global reach.



We must accept the reality -- increased conflict in Afghanistan means increased insecurity for many other countries, near and far.

Regional countries have an important role to play in helping Afghanistan to stabilize and integrate more fully into the region. I welcome the appointment of Mr. Jean Arnault as the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Afghanistan and Regional Affairs and have been working very closely with him. As well as the existing regional formats, such as the Extended Troika, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Heart of Asia and others should all be further galvanized to reinforce a political and peaceful pathway for Afghanistan.

Madame President,

We can all agree that any future Government of Afghanistan will need, for itself and its citizens, international engagement and support. The contributions of donors will be essential to support the ongoing development and humanitarian needs. This is not the time to weaken our resolve or, worse, to contribute even inadvertently to the ongoing signals of despair.

Madame President,

I have reassured Afghans that the UN will not abandon them and will stay the course.

Certainly, every effort must be made now by all of us to avoid the country going down the path of more bloodshed and suffering. Surely there has been enough.

There is only one acceptable direction for Afghanistan – one acceptable direction – away from the battlefield and back to the negotiating table. The United Nations Security Council with the support of the regional countries must do all it can to push the parties in that direction. The tragic history of conflict need not repeat itself—but left to its own and our inertia it just might.

Thank you for this opportunity. I very much appreciate the participation of senior people from the capitals, and I look forward once again to the guidance of the members of the Security Council to help this wonderful country.

Thank you

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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.