



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

Kabul, 3 March 2021

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Madame President,

Good morning and welcome, wonderful to be with the Council again.

Madame President,

Over six months have now passed since the launch of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations on September 12th of last year and a full year since the signing of the agreement between the United States and the Taliban, and the concurrent joint declaration between the Government of Afghanistan and the United States. It is therefore perhaps a timely moment to take stock, and to assess what more must be done to support the Afghan people on their path towards peace. And let me remind the Council that what we do in the immediate months ahead will have a great impact on how steady that path can be. The killings, the displacement, the suffering of the Afghan people must end. Now.

Since my last briefing, progress at the negotiations in Doha has slowed. Afghans and their international partners have begun to voice understandable frustrations about the lack of real outcomes, against the incredible backdrop of extreme violence throughout the country. It is notable however that both sides in the negotiations have been dedicated to remaining at the negotiation table in Doha and continue with the talks. In my recent trip to Doha in early March, I was encouraged to hear from both sides of real substantive progress that they are now making on key agenda items. But clearly, more must be done to demonstrate to Afghans that the negotiations are progressing in the real interests of the Afghan people.

As the talks continue, many stakeholders are increasingly looking to the UN to play a more prominent role. I welcome the appointment of my experienced colleague Mr. Jean Arnault as the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Afghanistan and Regional Issues. This will enhance and complement our ongoing work on regional cooperation. We in UNAMA will be working closely with Mr. Arnault in support of Afghan peace and the all-important regional engagement.

As well, for their part, a number of member states have played a vital role of late, in proposing new initiatives to reinvigorate the peace process. International attendees at the recent meeting in Moscow made it clear that they wanted to see fresh impetus in the negotiations. The extended Troika – comprising Russia, China, the United States, and Pakistan- released a statement advocating a “durable and just political resolution” that would result in “the formation of an independent, sovereign, unified, peaceful, democratic, and self-sufficient Afghanistan”. I am quoting from their statement.



As well, the recently proposed meeting by the US to be held in Turkey, in the coming months, is another opportunity to solidify the principles upon which the process will be based, and potentially lay the foundation for a just and inclusive political settlement that would complement the ongoing negotiations in Doha.

These initiatives must however be focused and coherent. Above all, they must reinforce, rather than undermine, the Afghanistan peace negotiations underway now in Doha. As we enter this upcoming period of heightened intensity, all of us - neighbours, regional players, and international partners – have the responsibility to ensure that our actions are well integrated, mutually reinforcing, and, most importantly, are in the best interests of the Afghan people.

Madame President,

Given the many interests involved – both domestic and international, to be clear – we always knew that this would be a complicated peace. I will say it again, we always knew that this would be a complicated peace. Decades of conflict have created real grievances on all sides and there remains a lack of trust amongst the parties. There are also genuine and profound differences between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban over their desired end state.

None of this can be resolved in the work of a moment – nor in a few meetings, no matter the location or format. Addressing these issues will require patience and commitment on all sides. But my experience, I'm happy to report, my experience from speaking to both negotiating parties in Doha, and to many Afghans from all walks of life, tells me that peace is possible. Afghans are not just ready for peace: they are demanding it. And all sides need to stop the violence and need the violence to stop.

Madame President,

If the peace process is to be sustainable, the parties must look not to Afghanistan's past, but to its future. Any peace settlement must take into account the views and the concerns of all Afghans – not just those of an elite few. I pay tribute to Chairperson Akbar, joining us today, who, along with her colleagues in the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and other organizations such as the Afghan Women's Network, and many other civil society groups have done tremendous work to make the process more inclusive – of women, of youth, of ethnic minorities, of victims of war. As the international standard bearer for human rights, the UN is working alongside all of these groups and all Afghans to promote an inclusive peace.

I, like all of us, Madame President, have followed with admiration the work of many Afghan women throughout these negotiations. While still too few in numbers, they are demonstrating through their contributions how the country has changed over the past two decades. Women must and will inform discussions on all topics of peace.

Madame President, Security Council members,

Afghan women must be present in the room and at the table when the future of the country is decided on.

And why? Because this is not the Afghanistan of twenty years ago! Both the peace process and any peace agreement must reflect the Afghan population of today. Allow me to recall, for all of us, that half of the population of Afghanistan was born after the signing of the Bonn



Agreement in 2001. This generation has grown up in a different Afghanistan – one in which young people aspire to a proper education; two, one in which women have access to positions of economic and political power; three, one where media play a vital civic role; and four, one where civil society has had the space to flourish. These Afghans are now a majority. They deserve to have their voices heard during the negotiations – and to have the inherent right to an active and substantial role in Afghan society after a peace agreement is concluded.

But, Madame President,

All Afghans are suffering. Suffering from unprecedented levels of violence – even as peace negotiations continue. I am very sorry to report that in the first two months of 2021, we have witnessed the continued trend of rising civilian casualties, documented since the start of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations in September. Particularly worrying is the array of attacks deliberately targeting civilians. Already this year, UNAMA has documented more than 80 Afghans – including media, civil society, members of the judiciary, religious scholars, and government officials – who have lost their lives in these brutal targeted attacks.

But this does not convey the full and crippling impact of the violence on Afghanistan's civic life and on the Afghan people. For every Afghan killed, there are many more who leave their professions, or sadly, feel that they must leave their country. And so I want to thank members of the Council for your statement of 12 March condemning the recent attacks deliberately targeting civilians. We must all raise our voices against these egregious acts.

Madame President,

Against this backdrop, Afghans continue to suffer from a deepening humanitarian crisis, and the threat of drought is looming. Food insecurity is at record levels, with more than 40 per cent of the population in emergency and crisis situations. The low precipitation and high temperatures witnessed over the La Nina season have raised concern over a further deterioration, and as always, the poorest Afghans will suffer. I count on you, and all member states, to contribute generously to the humanitarian response plan, which stands at just six per cent funded. Much more support is needed if Afghanistan is not to fall further behind as they face this humanitarian crisis.

But money alone is not enough. Humanitarian workers continue to be targeted with threats, violence, and interference with the impartial delivery of assistance. Such acts are illegal and unjustified. They also have grave consequences for the lives and livelihoods of Afghans. Humanitarian partners must be able to operate without being illegally taxed, harassed, threatened, or killed. I raised this critical issue recently during my meetings with the Taliban in Doha, and I'm happy to report that members of our humanitarian team are leaving shortly to continue those talks with the Taliban in Doha. We have also been working closely with the Afghan Government to ensure its legislative framework protects the space of NGOs carrying out humanitarian work.

As we face this daunting humanitarian crisis, we need the violence to decrease, we need the access to increase, we need additional funding, and we need the all-important NGO community to be allowed to do their important work.



On a happier note, Madame President,

I want to report that Afghanistan for now, seems to have weathered the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we must remain vigilant about a potential third wave, vaccinations have now begun, thanks to the donations from the Government of India and the support of the COVAX facility. As the vaccination campaign continues to ramp up, we must continue to ensure that vaccines reach all prioritized groups across the country.

But, Madame President,

It is also important to note that developments in Afghanistan do not only affect Afghans. Developments in Afghanistan, stability in Afghanistan, peace in Afghanistan effect the global community. To take just one example, the cultivation and trafficking of illegal narcotics continues to threaten stability in Afghanistan, in the region and will continue to impact the world community.

Last year saw opium poppy cultivation increase by over a third, while the number of counter-narcotics operations unfortunately was reduced significantly. We know from history, from all other peace processes that an illicit economy can continue to threaten peace and security long after a peace agreement is signed. Sustained cooperation will be needed to mitigate this threat to Afghanistan and to the region and, indeed, to the world. You have my commitment to keep you informed of progress in this critical area. Another enduring global threat is that of transnational terrorism, particularly associated with the Islamic State group. In the last quarter, ISIL-KP claimed responsibility for 25 violent acts, a steep increase over the previous three months. Recently, the group claimed responsibility for the brutal killing of three female media representatives in Jalalabad city. This violence is a vivid demonstration of the ongoing threat that terrorism poses to Afghanistan, to the region, and to the world.

Madame President,

When I speak to the Council next, in June, we will have passed the proposed date for the withdrawal of international troops under the US-Taliban agreement. I hope that by then, we will be able to discuss real progress, brought about by continued negotiations in Doha, tangible outcomes from the meeting in Turkey, and, if not a ceasefire, at least a substantial de-escalation in violence. The coming months will also see further increased activity on the regional front, starting with the Heart of Asia ministerial meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, at which regional countries will gather and, I know, reaffirm their ongoing support for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

All of this could mark a turning point – but the road ahead is still not clear, and we are moving into a period of great uncertainty and intensity. UNAMA, with the strong mandate the Council has given us, will continue working with all partners – the Government of Afghanistan, the Taliban, community leaders, regional partners and the larger international community – to foster a coherent process for the much-needed peace.

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.

UNITED NATIONS ASSISTANCE MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN

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