



**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**VIDEO REMARKS TO THE AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE**

**Geneva, 24 November 2020**

Your Excellency President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani,

Your Excellency Minister Pekka Haavisto,

Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for your presence in person and online today, and for your solidarity with the Government and people of Afghanistan on their path toward peace, stability and prosperity. I thank the Governments of Afghanistan and Finland, our co-hosts, for their cooperation.

Despite decades of conflict, the people of Afghanistan have made significant progress over recent years. Access to water, sanitation, electricity and health services has increased. Across the country, girls and boys are more likely to be in school.

The Afghan economy has diversified. Improved infrastructure and power supplies are connecting remote areas to national economic opportunities, and to neighboring countries. More women are in government, and in legislatures at the national and local levels.

Afghans have made remarkable progress in achieving their human rights – particularly those of women, minorities, and children.

As we look ahead, these rights must be the foundations for a peaceful future. It is essential that they remain anchored in law and protected in practice.

Excellencies,

The people of Afghanistan face serious challenges, including conflict, poverty and the uneven application of the rule of law.

Two major global crises, COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency, are making life even more difficult, particularly for the most vulnerable.

The pandemic has exacerbated humanitarian and development challenges, impeded access to healthcare and education, and stymied economic growth, affecting millions of Afghans. As winter approaches, I am concerned that another spike in COVID-19 cases will further strain Afghanistan's already fragile health system and economy, causing further suffering.

I am also deeply concerned about continued high levels of violence, particularly the recent heinous attacks on civilians, including students. The Afghan people have suffered for far too long.

I urge the redoubling of efforts towards an immediate, unconditional ceasefire, in order to save lives and prevent the further spread of COVID-19.

This will create a conducive environment for the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations in Doha – a major opportunity to realize the long-held aspirations of the Afghan people.

An inclusive process, in which women, young people and victims of conflict are meaningfully represented, offers the best hope of sustainable peace.

If we can link that with economic opportunity, the prospects will be even brighter. Today is an opportunity to work together towards that goal.

Excellencies,

Afghan women have paid a high price in the conflict. Some have been subjected to extreme violence; others have lost loved ones, homes and communities; many continue to be denied opportunities of all kinds, including education and basic rights to livelihoods, land, legal personhood, and a life free of violence. I commend the women who are serving their country today in senior roles in the Defence, Foreign Affairs and Interior Ministries, as well as in the civil service and provincial governments. These are gains that must be protected and built on.

Afghan women are playing a central role in creating peaceful, inclusive communities with more opportunities for all - women and men, girls and boys, people with disabilities, victims and survivors of the conflict. They are demonstrating on a daily basis that their efforts towards sustainable and inclusive development can change lives for the better.

Afghan women and girls need the continued support of the international community. It is absolutely essential that the peace process is inclusive and that women play a meaningful and equal role in determining its outcome.

Excellencies,

I commend the Government of Afghanistan for its ambitious agenda for development and reforms, including its outreach to regional partners and commitment to connectivity.

I urge Afghanistan's neighbours and partners to play their part in building a peaceful and prosperous future for Afghanistan by seizing these opportunities for cooperation.

Progress toward peace will contribute to the development of the entire region, and is a vital step towards the safe, orderly and dignified return of millions of displaced Afghans.

The United Nations stands with the people of Afghanistan on the path toward peace, development and self-reliance.

I thank all for your pledges and generosity.

Let's make sure that these translate into real progress and concrete improvements for the people of Afghanistan.

Thank you.

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