



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

[as delivered]

25 June 2020

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Madame President,

Members of the Security Council,

I am delighted to address you today from Kabul. It is truly an honour to serve as the Special Representative for the Secretary-General in Afghanistan and as head of UNAMA. It is an honour. I have assumed my duties at an important – and some even say historic – moment in Afghanistan.

During my first months on the job, I have engaged with a range of interlocutors from across the political spectrum and from civil society. They all delivered one clear message: Afghanistan now has the unique opportunity to turn the corner to a brighter, more stable future after four decades of war. And many stand ready to support them. And yet, as we all know, this moment of emerging hope comes at the time of an unprecedented global pandemic that threatens to unravel many of the hard-won socio-economic gains.

Madame President,

Afghanistan has made immense progress in recent years. I am deeply impressed by the strength and courage of the country's youth. I met many inspiring young people during my three years as Ambassador of Canada. And I am delighted to reconnect with many of them in their new positions as government and civil society leaders. We are privileged to be hearing from two of them today: Ambassador Raz, who has already made her mark in New York, and Ms. Akbar, the Chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, with whom I recently was honoured to lead a panel on women's involvement in the peace efforts. Both Ambassador Raz and Chairperson Akbar are part of this new generation committed to creating a peaceful and self-reliant country, respectful of human rights for all. Inspired by what I see, I am further committed to use my voice and platform to champion them, and champion human rights and women's rights and put these at the core of our work in Afghanistan.

Another important gain made in recent years that is particularly tangible is Afghanistan's free and vibrant media sector. Afghanistan is considered one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. Yet they persist in their essential work of holding those with authority accountable. They too are inspiring.

Afghanistan has also made significant strides in improving the living conditions of many of its citizens in the past two decades. Maternal mortality has been reduced by 66 per cent over a 15-year period and child mortality has decreased by half. The expansion in coverage of public health facilities has nearly doubled during this same period. There has been progress. These facts are incontrovertible.

Madame President,

I am also, though, fully cognizant that this progress was hard-won and remains fragile. Too many Afghans still face daily struggles for survival. And when it comes to civilian casualties, Afghanistan remains one of the deadliest conflicts in the world. The US-Taliban agreement and subsequent reductions of violence have given only brief respites from the all-too familiar carnage. Particularly egregious were the recent deliberate attacks against healthcare facilities at a time when all people, and all resources, need to be focused on combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. The recent 12 May attack against a maternity ward in western Kabul was particularly outrageous and established a new low. This



was truly a moment when new life was taken from the womb. The perpetrators must be found and held accountable.

I am also deeply concerned about the ongoing threat to civilians posed by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province. This was again demonstrated by the recent suicide attack in Nangarhar province at a funeral ceremony, which resulted in at least 29 civilians killed and many more injured.

Afghanistan also remains the deadliest conflict in the world for children. Last year alone, 874 children lost their lives as a result of the conflict and many, many more were injured. It grieves me to say that the number of children out of school has not dropped. But instead it has risen in the past eight years – the number of children out of school. If there ever was a call to prayer for peace, surely it would echo the voices of these children.

Like so many countries, Afghanistan continues to be plagued by corruption, which corrodes the confidence of the population and the donor community, and fuels the ongoing conflict. In spite of progress made in previous years in anti-corruption reforms, this progress has slowed in the past year, with key institutional reforms being neglected, including the establishment of the all-too-important independent anti-corruption commission. Apparent impunity of well-connected political figures remains a major issue. Additional progress in the fight against corruption is therefore crucial as the 2020 Pledging Conference on Afghanistan approaches.

These compounding challenges facing the country, including the COVID-19 health and humanitarian crisis, require, more than ever, determined and united leadership. And in this context I welcome the political agreement reached between President Ghani and Dr Abdullah, which shows their determination and resolve to place the nation first. In this spirit of cooperation, I expect to hear in the next few days the announcement of a representative cabinet and the formation of inclusive peace structures.

Madame President,

Despite these manifold challenges, this is the time for continued and concerted support for Afghanistan. As we pass the midpoint of Afghanistan's Transformation Decade, we enter what could be the most transformative phase; as the two parties to the peace talks move towards a new and lasting political settlement that must build on the gains of the past and set the foundation for a more prosperous future.

I am cautiously optimistic that the talks between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban negotiation teams will indeed start in the next few weeks in Doha, during the month of July. As the two sides embark on what will likely be a long and complex series of talks, I have encouraged them to show the necessary flexibility and foresight, the commitment to peace and most importantly compassion for their people that will be needed to bring these negotiations to a successful conclusion.

The formal announcement of a three-day Eid ceasefire by the Taliban and the Government led to a welcome and much-needed reduction in violence. A reduction in violence, as you know, is essential to an environment conducive for peace talks and to pave the way for an eventual permanent ceasefire. But the recent spiralling levels of violence threaten this process. So at this point, it is incumbent on all countries that support peace to use their influence and call for a reduction in violence.

On a more positive note, Madame President, I want to highlight however the commitment shown by both sides in the recent challenging issue of prisoner releases. This is an important confidence-building measure that has created momentum towards the negotiations. As I am speaking to you now, we are in the final stages, and it is noteworthy that both sides have agreed that the talks could start within a week of the completion of the prisoner releases. But again, this must be commensurate with a reduction in violence.

I would like to recognize the governments of the United States, Qatar and a number of other regional partners for their efforts in bringing the parties to this point; and we all look forward to the formal



commencement of the negotiations. The United Nations stands ready to support these direct talks, as required, and I have been in discussion with both sides to identify and address their needs going forward. We are working now very closely with a number of countries to build a network of support for the talks and for the parties, as needed.

As we know, the best chance for a durable settlement rests on a broad consensus, reflecting the aspiration and concerns of all citizens. We understand that both sides have now reached out to various constituencies to seek their views on peace. It is indeed crucial to develop inclusive structures for peace talks, that allow the meaningful participation of women, youth, minorities and victims of war. It is important that the rights of victims are addressed during the negotiations and approaches for reconciliation are considered.

Madame President,

Allow me to highlight another encouraging indicator for peace. I am seeing and hearing a strong resolve from the regional countries to support Afghanistan in its quest towards a peaceful settlement. The region's active engagement and support to the peace process will be essential, as they, in addition to the Afghans, have much to gain from peace and stability. I have already held a series of engagements with partners from the region and beyond, and am confident that together we will foster a constructive atmosphere for the peace process. Support from the region is available as well to advance strong economic and trade cooperation and connectivity as Afghanistan moves into a new period of stabilization and towards greater self-reliance.

Madame President,

At the same time as peace rises out there on the horizon, COVID-19 is casting a huge shadow over Afghan daily life. Under the leadership of the Afghan Government, the UN is supporting a coordinated response to fight this epidemic. This includes the establishment of a network of laboratories across the country and the provision of personal protective equipment to the Ministry of Public Health for healthcare providers.

Sadly, as in most crises, women and girls are disproportionately impacted: lockdowns further limit their mobility and increase the risk of domestic violence. The UN and partners continue to provide services to prevent sexual and gender-based violence and support reproductive healthcare.

In light of the scale of the crisis and the crippling economic consequences, the Humanitarian Response Plan has been updated to incorporate the COVID-19 requirements for 2020, reflecting the increased number of people in need. In total, humanitarian partners require \$1.1 billion to provide immediate humanitarian assistance. I appreciate contributions already received and count on the continued generosity of the international community to allow us to carry forward with the Afghan Government this essential response.

Madame President,

The socio-economic impact of weeks of lockdown, reduced economic activity and loss of remittances will be deep and long-lasting. Afghanistan faces the daunting challenge of seeking continued international financial support at a time of unprecedented financial uncertainty, including in many of the traditional donor capitals. Therefore, we are working in close partnership with the governments of Afghanistan and Finland to prepare for the upcoming Pledging Conference and building support for sustained resources for Afghanistan's future. This conference and the peace talks should be mutually reinforcing. I call for robust engagement by all stakeholders in preparation for the conference so that we can help Afghanistan bring the gains of the past into the future on this new peace landscape.

The global pandemic also poses, however, unique challenges for our own operational posture and has limited our ability to fully deliver on our mandate. Therefore, we have adopted a range of measures to safeguard the health and wellbeing of our staff while sustaining the delivery of critical programmes and



activities throughout the country. This, of course, includes an intense effort on the peace negotiations, an intense effort working with the Afghan Government to support them in the response to COVID, and continuing our standard-bearing human rights activities. National lockdowns, though, and disruptions to international travel have affected many of our colleagues. And I am so grateful to the governments who facilitated the rotational movement of critical staff and recently supported us with medical evacuations. Put simply, once again, you helped us save lives.

Madame President,

In closing, I will reiterate, COVID is not just a health crisis; it is a multi-dimensional crisis impacting an already fragile country. By working together, we can overcome COVID and support Afghanistan at the beginning of its nascent peace process so that its people can finally achieve the lasting peace they deserve.

The UN will continue to stand in partnership with the Afghan people through this time of unprecedented challenge and fragile hope. I am honoured to be part of the continued support in these crucial months ahead. The Afghan people will look to the guidance, to the support, and to the unity of this Council as they chart their way forward on their long road to peace.

Thank you.

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UNAMA is mandated to support the Afghan Government and the people of Afghanistan as a political mission that provides 'good offices' among other key services. 'Good offices' are diplomatic steps the UN takes publicly and in private, drawing on its independence, impartiality and integrity, to prevent international disputes from arising, escalating or spreading. UNAMA assists the process of peace and reconciliation; monitors and promotes human rights, including the protection of civilians in armed conflict; promotes good governance; and encourages regional cooperation. The Mission also promotes coherent development support by the international community.