



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

New York, 26 January 2022

[As delivered]

* * *

Prime Minister and President of the Council, Secretary-General, Ambassadors, and colleagues,

Your participation at this debate today speaks volumes about the continued importance of Afghanistan to the international community, as well as the rising concerns of all of us about the future of this country. And it is indeed a pleasure to be here with my friend Mahboub Seraj and to listen to her important message on behalf of civil society.

When Kabul fell to Taliban forces in August the United Nations made a commitment to stay and deliver to support the people of Afghanistan at a moment of humanitarian crisis and political uncertainty. A primary focus of our work, with the generous assistance of donors, was to alleviate as much as possible the dire humanitarian situation in face of this difficult winter. In addition to what the Secretary-General has just said on this, I would like to begin with a report of what we were able to achieve.

By the end of 2021, as noted by the Secretary General, almost 18 million people have been provided with life-saving assistance, including 10 million people with food assistance and 1.5 million with health care. This compares with 11 million people assisted during 2020, when ongoing drought conditions and the COVID 19 pandemic had already pushed humanitarian workers to exceed their initial planning targets. Last year, more than 2,000 primary and secondary health facilities in all provinces were supported by humanitarian assistance, including 450 tons of imported life-saving health supplies. This expansion of assistance was possible in part due to the improved security situation and humanitarian actors were able to access parts of the country that had been inaccessible for years.

Mr. President,

It is clear from the above how much we have accomplished, but as you all know humanitarian needs continue to be pressing. The approximately one billion US dollars that we asked for last year to address the humanitarian crisis now must be supplemented by 4.4 billion in additional humanitarian assistance for 2022 as set out in our recent appeal. To put this in perspective, this is roughly the same amount that donors spent on the entire operating budget of the government of the Republic in a given year. It is quite simply unsustainable over the long term. Therefore we have simultaneously been advocating—and will continue to do so—for a relaxation of those sanctions that prevent the full delivery of essential services and that continue to starve the economy of liquidity. Because of the liquidity crisis and the inability of banks to operate, we are facing an extraordinary situation where people have money in the bank but do not have full access to it to feed their families nor run their businesses.

Mr. President and Council Members,

Your adoption of the humanitarian exemption resolution and the issuing of new general licenses by the United States last December provided welcome assurances that facilitated our humanitarian activities. I am also pleased to announce that this afternoon here in Kabul we launched our One-UN Transitional Engagement Framework for Afghanistan, for which we are seeking an additional 3.6 billion dollars. This brings the total ask for 2022 to eight billion dollars. This comprehensive and system-wide strategy introduces a Basic Human Needs pillar to deliver essential services such as health and education, as well as provide maintenance for community infrastructure, and promote livelihoods and social cohesion, with a special emphasis on the socio-economic needs of women and girls. These investments are



designed to prevent a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation and indeed generate a sufficient level of economic stability to reverse the steady increase in poverty rates that we have seen, while ensuring that the critical donor funds are not diverted or misused.

And yet, we know that donors are understandably reluctant to show more flexibility until they have a better idea of what sort of government the de facto administration intends to create. Many donors were hesitant last fall to engage in ways that might help the de facto authorities consolidate their administration or appear to legitimize the regime. This hesitancy has been temporarily overcome in order to help the Afghan people, who were suffering from an extended humanitarian crisis and facing this brutal winter. However, it is clear that donors, who face their own domestic constituencies, are still not satisfied with the political progress in Afghanistan and are watching closely for more encouraging signals.

We hope, therefore, that we will see clear actions—not just announcements—in the next few months that demonstrate the Taliban are committed to a pathway of future engagement with the international community. By “pathway” I mean a series of clearly, mutually understood commitments, with human rights at the forefront, which would result in Afghanistan rejoining the community of nations by securing domestic legitimacy that aligns with Afghanistan’s modern history and the aspirations of its population, its multi-ethnic character, and its traditional Islamic identity.

The de facto authorities have taken some steps to function more effectively as a government, including the agreement on a budget fully financed by their own revenues, payment of government salaries, reduced corruption, consistent collection of revenues, successful management of the currency devaluation crisis at the end of last year, and efforts to engage the private sector. The well-organized economic conference they hosted last week was an opportunity to present their economic vision of achieving self-reliance based on private sector-led growth. But the private sector needs an end to uncertainty, a stable policy environment, a reliable rule of law framework, and an educated population if it is to truly thrive.

With regard to political inclusion, there have been some signs of wider consultation with political and civil society actors. Senior Taliban officials have met with ethnic minority representatives, but to date there have been no visible results in terms of greater ethnic inclusion in governing structures. The de facto foreign minister met with some former political leaders in Tehran earlier this month. And, of course, there was the meeting held over the last few days in Oslo between a high-level Taliban delegation and Afghan civil society actors from inside and outside the country. Their joint communiqué highlighted, and I quote, that “understanding and joint cooperation amongst Afghans are the only solutions to all the problems of Afghanistan.” It is noteworthy that the Taliban delegation widely acknowledged this communiqué. And now they must act on it.

I would also like to take a moment to thank the Prime Minister of Norway and his team of this timely initiative which we all understand was to not imply legitimacy but to advance an inclusive dialogue which it has succeeded to do.

On the other hand, here on the ground there is compelling evidence of an emerging environment of intimidation and a deterioration in respect for human rights. This suggests that the consolidation of government authority may be leading toward control of the population by fear, rather than by understanding and responding to its needs. Afghans now live with different—but no less real—fears than those they faced during decades of war. Despite announcements of general amnesties for those who worked for or defended the former Government, we continue to receive credible allegations of killings, enforced disappearances, and other violations that are not being addressed by the judiciary. In addition, we are seeing a growing number of detentions of political opponents, civil society



representatives and those who voice dissent. We note as well the increasing contraction of media space, which is partly for economic reasons but also due to pressure from the de facto authorities to report in ways that are not critical of them. And I must stress to this Council that we remain extremely concerned about the fate of several women activists who were abducted from their homes and have disappeared. No Afghan should live in fear of a knock at their door in the night and no family should be left to wonder about whereabouts and fate of their loved ones. UNAMA is engaging with the de facto authorities on this and other incidents, urging them to investigate such cases, to provide clear information, and to hold perpetrators accountable. We will continue to do so. And I expect that our strong communications with the de facto authorities will lead to results in this area.

Mr. President,

How can the Taliban demonstrate a clearer commitment to the path of governing based on trust rather than on fear, if that is indeed the path they choose to take? First, it is past time for them to initiate a wider dialogue on a process for national reconciliation. The international community would support such a process, but it must be initiated and entirely shaped by Afghans within and outside the country. Inclusion, furthermore, should never be seen as an external demand, but as a long-standing and required source of domestic legitimacy for such a diverse country, and as entirely critical to ongoing stability. For now the war has ended but peace has not yet been consolidated. The current comparative stability is in many ways underpinned by conflict fatigue and by communities and individuals focusing on mere survival. This peace, this stability, is thus fragile, and could unravel if measures are not taken to govern in a way that builds trust and accountability, and that focuses on the genuine needs of the people—including the need and the right to participate in their government.

Second, there is the all-important issue of girls' education. We welcome recent statements by the de facto authorities that girls of all ages will be educated nationwide. Some international donors have declared themselves ready to pay financial incentives to Afghan teachers for January and February, but future incentives will likely be determined by whether the de facto authorities deliver on their stated commitments. I am happy to report that UNICEF and the Ministry of Education are having intensive sessions on technical preparations to open schools for all Afghan boys and girls in March. UNAMA also continues to meet with de facto authorities regarding higher education, a vital and often overlooked sector that was particularly dynamic in the past 20 years but that has been devastated by the recent economic crisis.

Third, there must be more meaningful actions behind the Taliban's promise to contain terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Since my previous briefing it appears that the de facto authorities have attempted to constrain the Islamic State's ability to carry out major attacks, and yet small-scale attacks are still being carried out, particularly against religious minorities. The existence of numerous terrorist groups in Afghanistan remains a broad international and especially regional concern. The desire of the de facto authorities to take on this threat across the board remains to be convincingly demonstrated. And yet at the same time, a certain amount of realism is required regarding its capacity to do so. Given the common interest in addressing this threat, if sufficient trust can be established this could be an area for potential cooperation between the international community and the de facto authorities. A new conversation, a new dialogue on this is warranted.

Mr. President,

I would like to highlight the cautious but constructive approach regional countries have taken towards Afghanistan since last August. Numerous meetings have been held in various formats as detailed in the Secretary-General's report. Of particular note was the recent extraordinary meeting of foreign ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, hosted by Pakistan in December. The OIC agreed to establish a humanitarian trust fund for Afghanistan and appointed a Special Envoy. We welcome the increased involvement of the OIC as a truly substantive partner and look forward to their engagement with us and the de facto authorities on inclusivity, on human rights, on girls' education and on a broad



set of common issues. I am happy to report to you that I had a highly productive meeting with the OIC's Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Ambassador Tarig Ali Bakheet, and we are preparing together a comprehensive agenda of cooperation.

Mr. President,

The UN's commitment in August to stay and deliver means we are well-positioned now to continue supporting the Afghan people, acting as an enabler of others who are willing to provide additional support, and engaging as a bridge with the de facto authorities on the way forward. As the Secretary-General noted, he is about to present recommendations on a future political mission in Afghanistan. These are based on a presumed consensus that it is in no one's interest to see a collapse of the current state in Afghanistan, but also that continued engagement with the Taliban can lead to progress along a negotiated pathway that delivers for the people of Afghanistan, the region, and the rest of the world. Testing that hypothesis will be our task in the months ahead.

Mr. President,

I thank you again for this opportunity. The debate today, and the high-level of its participants, shows to the people of Afghanistan that their plight is not being ignored. It demonstrates our sincere hopes that the opportunity provided by the current end to the conflict can transition to a dignified and responsible peace. We look forward to your deliberations on UNAMA's future mandate in the coming weeks and, we trust in your support.

Thank you.

END