



**Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Secretary-General's
Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan and OIC UNAMA, Ms. Ingrid Hayden**

[as delivered]

31 March 2020

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Mr. President,

Distinguished members of the Security Council,

Afghanistan appears to be reaching a defining moment. Almost two decades after the start of the coalition intervention, the question for the Islamic Republic now is: can its leaders rally together to engage in meaningful talks with the Taliban to achieve a sustainable peace? The choice is made stark by the all-encompassing threat of COVID-19, which poses grave dangers to the health of Afghanistan's population and, potentially, to the stability of its institutions.

Mr. President,

Afghanistan's presidential election, which took place on 28 September of last year, was a protracted process. The reasons why are well-documented, but now is not the time for acrimony. The issue at hand is preserving the Islamic Republic and advancing the values its Constitution enshrines.

On 18 February, the Independent Election Commission announced President Ashraf Ghani as the winner of the elections. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the declared runner-up, rejected the outcome and unilaterally claimed victory and announced his intention to form his own national government. On 9 March, President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah held parallel Presidential inauguration ceremonies. This prompted serious concerns in many quarters, Afghans and internationals alike, of the potential for a dangerous miscalculation which could have long-lasting implications for the future of the Republic.

As I speak, this impasse continues, despite intensive engagement by key stakeholders, particularly the United States, regional actors and Afghan political leaders, aimed at ending the brinkmanship. The seriousness of the situation is underlined by the US decision on 23 March to immediately reduce assistance by 1 bn USD for 2020 and their preparedness to do the same again the year after. Given the state's heavy reliance on donor funding, this could have severe consequences for Afghanistan's fiscal viability, as well as for socio-economic outcomes in the country. Now, with the onslaught of COVID-19, many donors are likely to turn inwards to meet the needs of their own population. Afghanistan needs to demonstrate a compelling case for the continued investment of international resources.

UNAMA is urging all Afghan parties to work together to resolve their differences peacefully for the good of the people of Afghanistan. Now is not the time for divisions. Now is the time for statesmanship, accommodation and inclusivity. The interests of Afghans must come first – including the rights of all women, minorities and youth.



Mr. President,

Resolution of the conflict depends on the will of all actors to engage constructively on the fundamental issues at stake. This is a profound responsibility and above all, it is for Afghan leaders. Understandably, grievances are deep seated, multi-faceted and impact on all segments of society. But now may be a rare opportunity to address these issues.

So, it is heartening that despite the political impasse, the Afghan establishment have been able to agree on a diverse negotiating team. The team includes representation from all major ethnic groups, and five women members. It is an important recognition that women can and must be involved in reaching any sustainable and lasting peace in Afghanistan. UNAMA has encouraged the Taliban to reciprocate by including women in their delegation who have an empowered decisive voice at the table. Doing so would send a tangible signal that the movement has fundamentally reformed.

All sides are urged to take concrete steps to make the prospect of Intra-Afghan negotiations a reality. Having announced its negotiating team, the Islamic Republic has the weighty task of equipping its negotiators with the necessary skills to help frame its agenda, and the necessary principles to secure and advance the rights of its citizens. It is also incumbent on the Taliban to demonstrate that they are ready to enter into good-faith negotiations with the Islamic Republic with a view to achieving a lasting settlement to the conflict.

Recent weeks have also seen developments on prisoner releases, which, if carefully managed, could form an important confidence-building measure to start the peace process. Despite the very real logistical challenges imposed by COVID-19, representatives of the Government of the Islamic Republic and the Taliban have now held three video teleconferences to discuss prisoner releases. UNAMA welcomes this engagement and urges the parties to resolve the prisoner release issue swiftly in accordance with international law.

Mr. President,

The signing of the agreement between the United States and the Taliban on 29 February was a landmark moment in the Afghan conflict. The agreement provided for the conditions based full withdrawal of international military forces from Afghanistan, and the first tranche of this withdrawal is underway. For their part, the Taliban appear to be adhering to their commitment to reduce violence against international military forces. However, the last few weeks have seen conflict-related violence in Afghanistan surge again to previous levels, driven mainly by Taliban attacks against the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.

This trend is regrettable, but it is also reversible. The past few months have shown, yet again, that a significant reduction of violence can be achieved, with the genuine commitment of all parties. This was demonstrated in the lead up to the signing of the United States-Taliban Agreement, which saw a significant reduction in violence across the country. It is the hope of UNAMA that this will soon be repeated and sustained as intra-Afghan negotiations make progress. Above all, the international community must not forget what Afghans desire as an outcome from the peace process: a comprehensive end to the conflict that protects their security and advances their rights.



Mr. President,

The increased level of violence has had tragic consequences for civilians caught in the conflict. For this month alone, we have recorded more than 180 civilians killed and many more injured due to the hostilities. During the period, the Taliban has been responsible for a high number of civilian casualties, mainly from non-suicide improvised explosive devices and targeted killing. While UNAMA noted fewer civilian casualties attributed to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, I am seriously concerned by the incident of 21 March when Afghan Air Forces conducted an air strike in Kunduz. Our initial findings indicate that almost all killed were women and children.

We are also deeply concerned about the ongoing threat to civilians posed by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province. This was again demonstrated by the inhumane attack on 6 March at a commemoration for a Hazara leader in Kabul, which killed 34 civilians and injured scores more. We were also outraged by the attack claimed by the group on worshippers at a Sikh-Hindu temple in Kabul on 25 March, which killed and injured dozens of civilians. These barbaric attacks against Afghan civilians must stop.

Mr. President,

UNAMA has continually emphasized that the best way to protect civilians from conflict and the evolving health crisis is to stop the fighting altogether. I would like to highlight the Secretary-General's call for an immediate global ceasefire, so that the necessary focus and resources can be provided to combating COVID-19. A reduction of violence leading to a ceasefire in Afghanistan would save lives, create a more conducive environment to commence intra-Afghan peace negotiations, and enable the Government to focus its efforts on combating the looming health crisis.

The risks to Afghanistan posed by the threat of COVID-19 are extreme. The deadly effects of the virus are of particular concern given Afghanistan's fragile health system and highly vulnerable population. This includes high numbers of Afghans suffering from malnutrition, living in close proximity to one another, including internally displaced persons, prisoners and detainees in the overcrowded penitentiary system. As well as those with specific needs, including physical disability and mental health issues. A particular challenge in Afghanistan is women's access to medical care, which is complicated by the prevailing security situation and entrenched cultural norms.

Along with these public health issues, we are also concerned about the economic and social impact of the loss of livelihoods on families, particularly given the lack of in-built social protection guarantees. The pandemic and its economic impact also threaten to exacerbate inter-communal tensions, particularly between migratory populations and host communities. If not addressed in a timely and comprehensive manner, this could have catastrophic consequences for Afghanistan and its people.

To help mitigate this risk, the UN in Afghanistan has developed a response plan to support the efforts of the Afghan Government in responding to the COVID pandemic. This will require funding of USD 108.1 million until 30 June. I would like to extend our profound thanks to donors who have already pledged to contribute to this effort. I encourage other member states to follow their lead. As the Secretary-General has said, COVID-19 is menacing the whole of humanity – and so the whole of humanity must fight back. Only through the collective action



of member states, in close cooperation with Afghan authorities, can we hope to minimise the impact of this global threat on Afghanistan's vulnerable population.

Mr. President,

The confluence of political uncertainty, delays in the commencement of the peace process, increasing violence, and the imminent full-force of the COVID-19 pandemic makes this a critical time for the people of Afghanistan. Addressing these issues will require joint efforts from all of us, in the interests of the global population. I would like to pay particular tribute to the thousands of brave frontline responders, working for the Afghan Government, NGOs, and UN and other international humanitarian agencies. They are incurring significant personal risks to protect the people of Afghanistan against the impending threat of COVID-19. I also thank members of the Council for their ongoing interest in and support to Afghanistan, which has only become more critical with the events of recent weeks. UNAMA remains fully committed to support the people of Afghanistan.

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.