



**Briefing to the United Nations Security Council  
by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva  
New York, 20 December 2022**

*[As delivered]*

\* \* \*

Madame President,

I have visited as many parts of Afghanistan as possible in my first three months in this position as SRSR [Special Representative of the Secretary-General]. What struck me most was the misery of so many Afghans who live in great poverty and uncertainty about the future. Many told me during my visits around the country that they are simply surviving. My colleague Martin Griffiths will provide details on the humanitarian situation. Beyond pressing immediate needs, however, Afghanistan is a country still traumatized by long decades of war.

The Taliban remain essentially in control of the country, but unable to satisfactorily address terrorist groups operating inside Afghanistan. We are greatly concerned about the recent activity of ISKP in particular, and the attacks on the embassies of the Russian Federation and Pakistan, as well as against a hotel hosting many Chinese nationals. Civilian casualties from these attacks were significant. Nonetheless, the general sense of security and freedom of movement for the people of Afghanistan remains. On the other hand, we are greatly concerned about recent continued exchanges of fire between Afghanistan and Pakistan. We welcome all efforts at de-escalation.

There is no significant visible political opposition to the Taliban inside Afghanistan. The exiled politicians of the Republic are, of course, vocal critics, but they are fragmented and their statements have decreasing resonance for the population inside Afghanistan. The Taliban reject the need for any sort of intra-Afghan dialogue and claim that their government is sufficiently representative. UNAMA continues to push at all levels for wider consultation and representation, as I briefed you during the Arria-formula session in October. We are also continuing to interact with many non-Taliban civil society and political figures in Afghanistan. We believe the only way forward for Afghanistan is through a more pluralistic polity, where all Afghans, especially women and minorities, see themselves represented and have a real voice in decision making. This is clearly not the case now. Furthermore, media and civil society, already suffering from serious financial constraints, continue to be stifled through intimidation by *de facto* security institutions and at times through repressive actions.

The suppressing of opposing voices is all the more unfortunate given the increasing harshness of the Taliban's social policies. We have seen a slew of decrees that are especially harmful to women. Women have been banned as of 9 November from visiting most public parks, bath houses, and gymnasiums. Their social space is now being restricted as much as their political space. The prevention of secondary education will mean that in two years there will be no girls entering into university. This decision is extremely unpopular among Afghans and even within the Taliban leadership. It has been criticized by the entire Islamic world. It has undermined the Taliban's relationship with the international community. But it remains in force causing damage today that will be felt long into the future.

On 13 November the Taliban conveyed that Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhunzada had ordered that judges implement capital and corporal punishments, known as *hudūd* and *qisās*, if conditions are met according to Sharia law. UNAMA has documented that these punishments have taken place ever since the Taliban takeover. Since the announcement of the Taliban leader's instruction, however, they have become increasingly public.

International criticism of these corporal punishments as violations of human rights have been rejected by the Taliban as being anti-Islamic. We have urged the Taliban to apply religious law in ways that avoid pain, including acts of corporal punishment, as many Islamic countries do. On 7 December, the first judicially sanctioned public execution, reportedly as implementation of *qisās* punishment, took place for a murder that took place in 2017. It was attended by senior members of the Taliban. I reiterate here what I have stressed to the *de facto* authorities: the death penalty is incompatible with the core principles of international human rights law. The UN uniformly criticizes all countries that apply the death penalty and corporal punishment.

It is clear that there are severe differences of positions on a range of issues between UNAMA and the *de facto* authorities. We, as the UN, have an ongoing dialogue with the Taliban regarding human rights concerns, and specific violations of international human rights law. We do not see eye to eye with the Taliban on a number of issues, but the focus is, and should be, on maintaining a dialogue in the hope of a better future for Afghanistan, where everyone – women, men, girls and boys – can live a life with dignity and equality.

Madame President,

There are, however, some positive developments, in particular on the economic front.

Overall levels of corruption are significantly down compared to the Republic, but there are worrying signs of an uptick in the past six months, especially petty corruption at the local level. The *de facto* authorities have announced the collection of more revenues in the first ten months of 2022 than the Republic collected in 2021 and 2020, despite an economic contraction of 20 percent in 2021. With these revenues, and by reducing the costs of government, the Taliban have managed to finance their operational budget and have indicated they have resources to begin some development projects.

The Taliban have also managed to maintain macroeconomic stability, albeit at a much lower level of economic activity. After a steep deterioration of the currency one year ago, the Afghani has remained generally stable. Exports have risen to a historic level of about US\$ 1.7 billion this year, compared to about US\$700 million under the Republic.

The *de facto* authorities are implementing an economic strategy that focuses on self-reliance. They are investing in sectors such as agriculture, irrigation, infrastructure, water management, mining and industries, that provide a foundation for economic growth. The Taliban have identified the private sector as a key driver for economic growth and they are somewhat responsive to the concerns of private sector actors. UNAMA has been in regular contact with private sector actors and organizations, including women's chambers of commerce. The main impediment to greater investment is the high cost of international financial transactions.

While the Taliban's economic management has been more effective than expected, it should also be recognized that international donors continue to feed more than half of the population. The cash payments required to deliver humanitarian assistance, indirectly inject liquidity into the economy. Without this assistance the picture in Afghanistan could be far bleaker.

Finally, there is evidence that the Taliban are implementing their ban on cultivation of opium and other narcotics that was announced in April by destroying fields that were planted before and after the announcement of the ban. We will not be able to verify the actual implementation of this ban until early

next year but the intention behind it is commendable. Nonetheless, the ban will have a negative effect on the income of individual farmers as few alternative livelihood programmes were put in place.

Madame President,

These somewhat positive economic developments might not be sustainable if the real concerns of Afghans are not addressed. Between 11 October and 8 November UNAMA carried out stakeholder meetings in 12 provinces which were selected to ensure a representation of all Afghan communities and sectors. We engaged with 519 participants, including 189 women and 83 representatives of the *de facto* authorities. The concerns expressed by the population had to do with the ban on girls' education, lack of health facilities, mental health problems of the population, poverty and economic insecurity and discrimination of ethnic minorities. The Taliban have not addressed these issues and in many cases their decisions have made them worse.

But during these stakeholder discussions, Afghans are also frustrated with the international community's approach. They have expressed a desire for projects that are more long-term, that involve cash-for-work rather than handouts, that are more participatory and consultative, and more development-oriented. Under current conditions, however, donors are increasingly unwilling to look beyond the provision of humanitarian assistance. As long as girls remain excluded from school and the *de facto* authorities continue to disregard other stated concerns of the international community, we remain at something of an impasse. In UNAMA we are undertaking an internal review to assess what has and has not been effective in the implementation of our mandate. This will yield recommendations regarding our future mandate. But overall we believe that engagement with the *de facto* authorities must continue in some form. As you yourselves heard yesterday from female humanitarian workers, Afghans want continued engagement from the international community and believe that it is only through increased interaction with the *de facto* authorities that positive change can take place.

UNAMA's focus must remain on the Afghan people, providing them life-saving humanitarian assistance, giving a voice to their demands for fundamental rights and freedoms, and—by our presence—holding out hope that Afghanistan will not be isolated from the international community. We are committed to these goals and to trying to maintain a space for positive engagement with the Taliban. But we must do so with a sense of realism, patience and a proper understanding of the situation as it evolves. As always, we look to this Council for support and guidance.

Thank you.

\*\*\*