



**Briefing to the United Nations Security Council  
by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva  
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[As delivered]

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Mr. President,

Today is international women's day but I have few comforting messages to the women and girls in Afghanistan. The bans against women working, studying, traveling without a male companion, and even going to parks or baths remain in place. The Taliban claim to have united the country but they have also severely divided it by gender. At a moment when Afghanistan needs all of its human capital to recover from decades of war, half of the country's potential doctors, scientists, journalists, and politicians are shut in their homes, their dreams crushed and their talents confiscated. Afghanistan under the Taliban remains the most repressive country in the world regarding women's rights.

The Taliban tell us that this gender segregation is not a significant issue and is being addressed. They say they should be judged on other achievements. The reality is that the 20th December ban on higher education, and then the 24th December ban on women working for NGOs have serious consequences for the Afghan population and for the relationship between the Taliban and the international community. Funding for Afghanistan is likely to drop if women were not allowed to work. NGOs run by women, for example, have had to cease activities. If the amount of assistance is reduced, then the amount of US dollar cash shipments required to support that assistance will also decline. Discussions of providing greater development-style assistance, including small infrastructure and policies to mitigate the effects of climate change, as well as planned political engagements, have halted as a result of these bans. We understand that the Taliban have a highly different worldview than any other government, but it is difficult to understand how any government worthy of the name can govern against the needs of half of its population.

Mr. President,

Our focus has always been on the Afghan people. Indeed, our support for women's rights, human rights, and girls' education is because this is a clear expectation of the Afghan people. They rightly expect that their country should not be the most retrograde on the planet regarding women's rights. They understood by the assurances that the Taliban gave during the Doha negotiations that these rights would not be curtailed.

Some women have told us that they even welcomed the Taliban coming to power because it ended the war, but very soon they have begun to lose hope. They say their elimination from public life is no better than fearing violent death.

The Afghan people continue to suffer deeply in other ways. Afghanistan remains the largest humanitarian crisis globally. Two-thirds of the population, 28 million people, will need humanitarian assistance this year to survive. This will cost \$4.62 billion, the single-largest country appeal ever. Almost half of the population, 20 million people, are experiencing crisis levels of food insecurity. Six million are one step away from famine-like conditions.



Our humanitarian action is challenged by an increasingly complex access and security environment. The bans against women working in NGOs are not the only serious obstacles to reaching vulnerable populations. We are also concerned that national women staff working for the UN will also be banned. To date, we have seen efforts by the Taliban to prevent female staff coming to UN offices in five provinces. NGOs experience these restrictions to a much greater degree. In some provinces we have had to temporarily suspend providing assistance because local officials have placed unacceptable conditions on its distribution. In general, there has been a recent deterioration of the humanitarian space.

In 2022, before these constraints were put in place, the United Nations and NGO partners were able to reach 26.1 million people, in large part thanks to the greater access to the country due to improved security. I fear in 2023 that bans on women and other restrictions that the Taliban have willfully applied will hinder future access. December 2022 witnessed the highest number of access constraints. With the Taliban ban on women's NGO employment in place, our humanitarian workers are forced to make uncomfortable and imperfect compromises in order to continue to save Afghan lives. The absurdity of this situation requires no comment.

Our ability to deliver is also affected by growing concerns about the looming threat of ISIL-K to our own security and that of our NGO implementing partners. We are grateful for the security provided so far, but are concerned that the de facto authorities do not have the capacity to fully address emerging threats. Mitigating these threats will require more concerted and more united member state attention and is clearly an issue that the international community has in common with the de facto authorities.

Apart from the constriction of the rights of women and girls, we are also witnessing an erosion of other human rights. The Secretary-General's report notes ongoing extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture carried out by the de facto authorities against former government officials and security forces. These are violations of the Taliban's amnesty decree. There is no transparency regarding investigations of violations, and violations appear increasingly allowed to occur.

We have also seen continued implementation of the instruction by the Taliban leader calling for judicial corporal punishments often carried out in public. These acts constitute according to international law a form of torture and ill-treatment.

There is also greater stifling and repression of the media sector and civil society. Any society needs the voices of its citizens and constituencies to find compromises through dialogue, not intimidation and repression.

Mr. President,

One year ago, UNAMA proposed to this Council that the end of the general conflict in 2021 was an opportunity to build a positive peace. Our initial engagements with the de facto authorities were relatively constructive and gave us cautious hope. We began devising a pathway that would build confidence and clarify to the Taliban international expectations regarding their stated desire to rejoin the international community.

Yet the Taliban leadership beginning a year ago began consistently taking decisions that negate this stated goal. The accumulation of these decisions has been a form of government that is simply unacceptable to the international community – something that could not have surprised the Taliban. Our collective statements of condemnation and the imposition of sanctions have not had an effect. They may have hardened certain Taliban positions. On the other hand, I do believe that there is a faction within the Taliban leadership, and across the movement, that does not agree with the current direction



the leadership has taken. This faction understands that attention must be paid to the real needs of the people. Perhaps it can eventually execute a change of direction. But time is running short. Global crises are multiplying. Demands on donor resources are multiplying as the availability of those resources diminishes.

I see these dynamics with growing concern. I fear a history that repeats itself, with Afghanistan taking decisions that increase its isolation. Unlike in the 1990s, however, the world is much more focused on Afghanistan. UNAMA's strategy is to preserve whatever political space exists for honest and straightforward discourse between the Taliban, and the international community—both the region and the donors. We are at a moment of political impasse where trust is in short supply.

Mr. President,

UNAMA is in Afghanistan on your behalf, engaging every day with the de facto authorities, with the local political opposition, with civil society, with private sector actors, and increasingly with Afghanistan's youth, who will inherit the future now being shaped. Our field offices carry out road missions reaching all corners of the country, not only to provide assistance but to remain connected with the people to provide you with the best possible information regarding the situation on the ground. That situation is extremely complex, and sometimes there are greater grounds for hope than it appears, but there is no doubt that the larger and most visible trends are worrying and negative. They make it harder to preserve this necessary space for dialogue.

The international community, inside the region and out, have all called for these decrees to be reversed for the sake of the international community. This is a clear and unified position. We hope the Taliban give greater consideration to the fact that this is in their interest and above all in the interest of the Afghan people. At the same time, the international community must begin constructing an agenda for discussion with the de facto authorities that includes issues that matter to the Taliban. These two elements can form the basis of a process that can help build confidence and lead to a mutually acceptable outcome.

Finally, Mr. President,

In order for UNAMA to play its part in implementing this approach on behalf of this Council, we hope that we will be given a mandate for another year. As I mentioned in my last briefing, UNAMA commissioned an independent review of its mandate led by a former DSRSG. The general conclusions are that UNAMA's current mandate is sufficiently robust, balanced, and comprehensive for the current situation. Despite the setbacks I have described, we continue to assert that there is no alternative to unified, patient and principled engagement that puts the needs and rights of the Afghan people first.

Thank you.