



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

Kabul, 6 August 2021

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Mr. President and members of the Security Council,

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity of this special meeting on Afghanistan and the opportunity to brief you today. It is particularly important because Afghanistan is now at a dangerous turning point. Ahead lies either a genuine peace negotiation or a tragically intertwined set of crises: an increasingly brutal conflict combined with an acute humanitarian situation and multiplying human rights abuses.

Today we have an opportunity—an opportunity—to demonstrate the commitment of the UN Security Council and the regional and international community that you represent to prevent Afghanistan from descending into a situation of catastrophe so serious that it would have few, if any, parallels in this century. And let me assure you, such a catastrophe would have consequences far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. I do believe that the Security Council and the broader international community can help prevent the most dire scenarios. But it will require acting in unity and acting quickly. It will require acting.

In the past weeks, the war in Afghanistan has entered a new, deadlier, and more destructive phase. The Taliban campaign during June and July to capture rural areas has achieved significant territorial gains. From this strengthened position they have begun to attack the larger cities. The provincial capitals of Kandahar, Herat, and Lashkar Gah in particular have come under significant pressure. This is a clear attempt by the Taliban to seize urban centers with the force of arms. The human toll of this strategy is extremely distressing—and the political message is even more deeply disturbing.

Regarding the human toll, let me provide you with some evidence. Fighting has been especially severe in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province. Since 28 July, just 10 days ago, at least 104 civilians were killed and 403 wounded, as registered by the two main hospitals. Ground engagements and airstrikes are causing most of the civilian harm. All roads leading to and going out of the city are closed by the Taliban. Hospitals have nearly reached full capacity and can no longer accept patients. The available food supply in the city is fastly diminishing, which raises the possibility of an acute food shortage in coming days, as well as the shortage of medical supplies. In Kandahar, since the start of the offensive there, on 9 July, a month ago, more than 460 civilian casualties have been registered. Further to the west, in and around Herat, UNAMA has credible reports of over 135 civilian casualties from the onset of the Taliban offensive.

Let me quickly summarize that just in these three cases I am talking of over 1000 casualties, just in this last month.



In addition, homes, hospitals, shops, bridges and other infrastructure are being destroyed. In this dire situation the UN and humanitarian partners continue to be present to assess the needs and where possible to deliver assistance where we have the access. But this is becoming increasingly difficult.

Mr. President,

This is now a different kind of war, reminiscent of Syria recently or Sarajevo in the not-so-distant past. To attack urban areas is to knowingly inflict enormous harm and cause massive civilian casualties. Nonetheless, the threatening of large urban areas appears to be a strategic decision by the Taliban, who have accepted the likely carnage that will ensue. Afghanistan National Security and Defense Forces are defending these cities. But this defense will also undoubtedly cause civilian casualties. Urban warfare will also inflict daily miseries when basic infrastructure such as electricity and water networks are damaged. These tactics may amount to serious violation of international Humanitarian law for which individuals can be held accountable and may quickly amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The suffering caused by war comes on top of already increasing humanitarian crisis, with severe drought affecting the country - 18,5 million people, or nearly half of the country's population, is in need of humanitarian assistance. And yet, in the meantime, attacks on aid workers continue with more than 25 aid workers killed, and over 60 injured, in just the first six months of this year.

Mr. President,

For the past three years members of the international community, including members of this Council and UNAMA, have dealt with the Taliban as a potential partner for peace. We have had numerous discussions with their political representatives in Doha aimed at ending the conflict and finding a true political consensus. Many of us have done this with some reservations, but with the relentless hope for the Afghan people. We have accepted this in the name of peace that ordinary Afghans so desperately need.

There had been an expectation when the US-Taliban deal was signed in February 2020, you will remember, that we would see a reduction of violence. We did not. There had been an expectation when the talks between the Afghan Republic and the Taliban began in September of last year, that we would see a reduction of violence. We have not. There had been an expectation that when international troops left, we would see a reduction of violence. We did not. Instead, despite significant concessions for peace, we have seen a fifty percent increase in civilian casualties with the certainty of many more as the cities are attacked. There is a striking contrast between the activity on the battlefield and the quiet stalemate at the negotiation table in Doha—where we should be seeing the opposite: quiet on the battlefield and engagement around the negotiating table.

Mr. President,



I have focused today on the war against cities because a party that was genuinely committed to a negotiated settlement would not risk so many civilian casualties because it would understand that the process of reconciliation will be more challenging the more blood is shed. It would also recognize that they cannot risk the destruction of infrastructure that would be badly needed to rebuild the country once an agreement is reached. It should be made clear to the Taliban Political Commission that the exemptions to the travel ban and the high protocol with which they have been received by many of the countries were, in fact, predicated on a commitment and progress in the peace process.

Mr. President,

What is reportedly happening in areas under Taliban control is also of great concern to us. It is heart-breaking to hear, for example, reports of summary executions, beatings and clampdown on media. Radio stations in particular have stopped broadcasting. We also hear the fears voiced to UNAMA by many Afghan women. They tell us that they fear they will be killed if the Taliban return to power simply because they worked for the government or an NGO. They fear they will not be able to have access to medical or education services. These are the real concerns of people who are close to the edges of the Taliban advance. Let me be clear, because I know that the Taliban also pay attention to what we say in these sessions: I am reporting comments that have been expressed directly to us, not incidents that we have been fully able to confirm. We have also seen the Taliban denials. But these reports that we are receiving from ordinary Afghans throughout the country are so consistent, so uniform, and so urgent that we simply cannot wait for them to be proven before bringing them to your attention. I would add that these fears seem also to be corroborated by the large numbers of people seeking to leave Afghanistan. We expect both irregular and legal migration numbers to double this year. This increase logically must either be a response to the prospect of greater conflict or the desire to not live under Taliban governance.

Mr. President,

In speaking to Afghans, the impression I have now is of a population waiting apprehensively for a dark shadow to pass over the bright futures they once imagined. It is difficult to me to describe the mood of dread we are faced with every day. As one Afghan put it to us recently, “we are no longer talking about preserving the progress and the rights we have gained, we are talking about mere survival.” Another woman told us that she sometimes regrets that she had educated her daughter as that had put her daughter in a more vulnerable position.

Council Members, Mr. President,

For all of us who are parents of daughters, I can hardly think of a more despondent comment.

Afghans facing this coming darkness with a sense of being abandoned by regional and international community. They expect far greater engagement and visible support from you, as the council mandated to maintain international peace and security. In this regard, your statement of 4 August condemning the attack against the UN office in Herat was greatly



appreciated by us for the show of support for UNAMA, but more importantly for the call again for an end to the violence and a resumption of a meaningful peace process. This solidarity matters to Afghans. They need to hear and see more of it, in actions and in words.

Mr. President,

There are also several important opportunities in the near future where our words and our actions could help bring an end to this war. Next week there will be meetings in Doha of a number of the Special Representatives of key countries, including a meeting of the Extended Troika. And we, of course, will meet here again on 10 September for the regularly-scheduled Security Council briefing on Afghanistan.

How can we use these opportunities to address the deteriorating situation that we face? First, the Security Council must issue an unambiguous statement that attacks against cities must stop now. Second, those countries that meet with the Taliban Political Commission should insist in these meetings on a general ceasefire, a resumption of the negotiations, as well as reiterate the position of the Security Council and that of the regional and international community that a government imposed by force in Afghanistan will not be recognized. Third, as I have already mentioned, the travel ban exemption on Taliban members exists to allow them to travel for the sole purpose of peace negotiations. The exemption is to be renewed on 20 September. Further extension must be predicated on real progress on peace. Fourth, the Council and those states who meet with the Taliban must urge them to grant humanitarian access to areas it controls and commit to humanitarian ceasefires in contested areas—if it will not agree to the general ceasefire that truly the Afghans really require. At the same time, Member States should contribute to the severely underfunded humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan. This humanitarian appeal right now stands at only 30 percent funded. Number five, we need to put on notice the architects and perpetrators of the most serious violations of human rights. UNAMA strongly supports greater efforts by the UN and regional and international community to find ways to hold the perpetrators accountable. Sixth, the Council should give serious consideration to providing the United Nations with the mandate that allows it to play, when requested by both parties, a greater role in facilitating the negotiations.

Mr. President and Members of the Council,

We will meet again to discuss Afghanistan in little over a month. But we cannot wait. These next weeks will be decisive. But I am absolutely convinced that whatever happens on the battlefield—whether the Taliban take additional cities or whether the Government regains districts—the result will only prolong Afghanistan’s agony. We as the members of the regional and international community so well represented here by this Council must put aside our own differences on the question of Afghanistan and send a strong signal—not only in our public statements but also in our bilateral communications with both parties—that it is essential to stop fighting and negotiate, in that order. Otherwise, there may be nothing left to win.

Thank you for this opportunity. The people of Afghanistan are listening to us.

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UNAMA supports 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.

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