



TRANSCRIPT

Opening remarks delivered by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons at Afghanistan 2020 Conference Plenary

[as delivered]

Geneva, 24 November 2020

Excellencies,

UNAMA is honoured to co-host this conference at this historic moment for Afghanistan. I thank the Governments of Afghanistan and Finland for their leadership.

We are indebted to the United Nations Office in Geneva, whose Director-General is here with us today, for its exceptional support under difficult circumstances.

We meet today, in Geneva and virtually, with a common cause: to decide on the international community's support to Afghanistan for the remaining years of the Transformation Decade. We do so in full recognition of the stark choices facing Afghanistan. For this is indeed a time of unprecedented opportunity but also deep uncertainty and rising anxiety.

As we speak, Afghans representing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban continue negotiations in Doha. I am encouraged by the resolve shown by the negotiation teams to remain at the table and engaged in talks.

Eventually, the negotiations will need to cover sensitive and complex issues: about the country's political configuration; about the role of Islam in society and in the justice sector; about human rights, including women's rights and the rights of religious and ethnic minorities.

Ultimately, these are for Afghans themselves to decide. At the same time, Afghanistan has made significant gains in recent years towards strengthening its compliance with international norms. There is a clear expectation within the international community that this work should continue unabated: Afghanistan must move forwards, not backwards.

But, to be clear, the UN and international partners will stand by the Afghan people in full knowledge of the challenges facing this country. Violence levels are still far too high. Millions of Afghans remain outside their homeland. Thousands more are displaced inside Afghanistan. The last few years have seen millions more Afghans thrown into conditions of poverty, exacerbated this year by the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. And Afghans continue to see corruption as a grim fact of life.



These challenges cannot be ignored. But I urge all of you to approach them in a spirit of resolve, not of hopelessness. Because to focus exclusively on Afghanistan's problems would be to miss another story, one that is equally true and equally relevant. That is the story of progress: of children in school; of record numbers of women at high levels of government; of a lively and courageous media and a vibrant civil society; of a professionalizing civil service and an emerging cohort of well-educated youth, and a growing private sector.

This is the Afghanistan we are here to support. These are the gains we are eager to preserve. Afghans themselves are committed to preserving these gains. But they will need the ongoing support of the international community: political, financial, and technical. Now is not the time to walk away.

The nature of this support, however, will need to evolve as Afghanistan continues its journey toward self-reliance. Here, I would particularly like to highlight the role of regional countries. Already, we are seeing a steady increase in cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours: in trade and transit; in infrastructure connectivity; in education and health; in people-to-people ties. Yesterday, a dozen regional countries came together to echo their call for peace in Afghanistan and to highlight the enormous benefit to the region of a stable Afghanistan to the region. Tapping into this potential will be a key task for the coming years.

The UN has stood with the Afghan people for many decades, through good and bad times.

I look forward in the hours ahead to the many countries and organizations from across the globe expressing support to and solidarity with the people of Afghanistan.

Thank you.

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