



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

New York, 2 March 2022

[As delivered]

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Madame President,

The United Nations and implementing partners have spent the past winter months doing everything we can to meet the growing humanitarian needs in Afghanistan. This has been possible due to the generous support of donors, due to the ongoing support of this chamber, and due to the access to all parts of the country assured by the de facto authorities. We believe, as the winter season comes to an end, that we have perhaps averted our worst fears of famine and widespread starvation. Our humanitarian agencies were able to reach nearly 20 million people with some form of assistance in 397 out of Afghanistan's 401 districts. The first time with that degree of reach and coverage in over two decades and more. Providing short-term relief, however, is not the same as giving hope or preparing a strong foundation for Afghan self-reliance. Let's be realistic, what we have done has been only to buy a little time.

It is imperative that we not find ourselves six months from now in the situation we faced six months ago: with millions of Afghans facing another winter of starvation and the only tool at our disposal being expensive and unsustainable humanitarian handouts.

It is now most urgent to address Afghanistan's economy. And so, I would like to take a moment to highlight some of the key challenges. I want to start by emphasizing that we are nearing a tipping point that will see more businesses close, more people unemployed and falling into poverty. It is approaching a point of irreversibility. We welcome the many General Licenses issued by the United States Treasury and most particularly the recent General License Twenty aimed at facilitating commercial and financial activity and allowing work with all governing institutions, a huge step forward, albeit with some restrictions regarding sanctioned individuals. But other challenges to reviving the economy still remain. These include the collapse of demand due to cessation of all development assistance, restrictions on international payments, lack of access to hard currency reserves, lack of liquidity, and constraints on the Central Bank to carry out some of its core functions. UNAMA to date has taken all conceivable measures to inject liquidity into the economy, including the physical import of cash. UNAMA, together with the UN partners and the World Bank, is seeking to establish—on a temporary basis—I want to emphasize—a humanitarian exchange facility to allow a scale up in humanitarian programming, which as you all know is badly needed in this coming year, and also will provide access to US dollars to legitimate businesses to enable them to import goods and allow the supply chain to function once again. We will continue to engage with the Central Bank and the de facto authorities on this facility and with Member States on further support to the banking sector.

Madame President,

When UNAMA's mandate was rolled over for six months in September 2021 it was still too early for the international community to react to the Taliban's seizure of power. Six months of indecision, marked by continued sanctions albeit with some relief, and unstructured political engagement, are eroding the vital social and economic coping systems and pushing the population into greater uncertainty.

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Madame President,

Let make clear, that we do not believe that we can truly assist the Afghan people without working with the de facto authorities. This must be difficult for some to accept, but it is essential. We must acknowledge, however, that as we move forward, there still remains an enduring distrust between the Taliban and much of the international community, and even the regional countries and neighbors. The Taliban feel misunderstood and complain to us that our reports do not reflect the reality as they see it. They tell me that we underappreciate their achievements and that we exaggerate the problems—problems which they acknowledge and which they claim they are trying to solve.

Above all, the Taliban have told us that they should receive greater acknowledgement for the security that prevails in Afghanistan. In the six months since 15 August there has been a 78 percent decline in civilian casualties as a result of the reduction of the conflict. They also note that their amnesty declaration has been honored for the most part and that violations are not state sanctioned and that those violators will be punished. Of course, security problems remain, and I would like to note the tragic and senseless killing last week of eight polio vaccinators in northern Afghanistan. It is particularly unfortunate given the progress that we have been making with the de facto authorities on expanding the polio programme. Our sympathies with the families of the vaccinators.

The Taliban also highlight progress on the economic front, including strong revenues despite decreased economic activity, reduced government corruption, and a budget that does not require donor resources. They also point to public universities being reopened and their desire to see Afghans, all boys and all girls, educated to a high international standard. On this issue, the Minister of Education recently stated that the plan to reopen schools for girls and boys had been finalized and is now awaiting cabinet approval. We all anticipate with great hope and determination the reponing of the schools on 22 March. Yesterday, on the anniversary of the signing of the Doha agreement, the Taliban reiterated their declared commitment to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a threat to any country, and their desire for good relations with all states and international organizations. This complements another important point made to me recently by the de facto foreign minister, namely that their diplomatic policy is to ensure that Afghanistan also does not become an arena of competition between other powers or countries.

Most importantly, they complain that these positive achievements are being undermined by an undeclared economic war against them by the international community that has greatly affected and resulted in choking of the economy and they know also exacerbating the suffering of the population. This clash of perspectives forms the basis of a serious gap, gulf and distrust that must be addressed. And that is what UNAMA has been doing these past six month and what we hope you will be giving us the mandate to continue to do in the year ahead – to bridge this gulf for the betterment of all Afghans.

In response to all of this, we have articulated to the Taliban the concerns of the international community and most notably, the instructions from this chamber. As UNAMA, we must continue to report on what we see, even as we continue to build an understanding and the working relationship with the de facto authorities. We are concerned by restrictions on women and girls' fundamental rights, on extrajudicial killings, on enforced disappearances, on arbitrary detention, on respect for minorities, and on freedoms of assembly and expression.



We were extremely vocal on the need to release the disappeared women protesters and their family members last month. And indeed, they were released. However, another group of women was arbitrarily arrested. However, we just received the news this morning from Kabul that this group has also been released. Our team in Kabul is working to verify these reports and I will be following up with the de facto authorities when I return. But these releases continue to be good news and we continue to work with the de facto authorities on investigative processes, protocols, procedures, due diligence that must be put in place for all of these cases. As well recent sweeping house-to-house searches in Kabul, carried out by the main security institutions ostensibly as a crime-fighting measure, are also of concern. But I will raise this with the de facto authorities as part of our ongoing collaboration on such cases and I am confident that our communications on these issues will continue to improve.

Madame President,

Afghanistan indeed presents a complicated situation, with positive and negative trends occurring simultaneously. UNAMA has so far been able to address many issues through constructive engagement and cooperation with the de facto authorities, both on the humanitarian delivery as well as on some of the sensitive issues that I have just noted. We believe, as a political mission, that we can do much more to work with the de facto authorities on the main issues facing Afghan society.

But a political mission implies a political purpose. That purpose, implied in the Secretary-General's report, is ultimately to see Afghanistan, one of the original members of the United Nations, to rejoin the organization as a member in good standing, benefit from the resources of the international community, and contribute to the global discussion on issues of common concern. Naturally, working with the de facto authority in no way means condoning everything that it does, but this will give us the opportunity, on behalf of all of you and the rest of the international community, to help shape a future for the people of Afghanistan, free of conflict and where they can peacefully pursue their quest for prosperity, participation, and respect for their rights.

The Secretary-General in his report to this Council noted that the situation ahead is uncertain. He has therefore proposed a one-year mandate after which we can evaluate the results of a sustained political engagement.

Madame President and Members of the Council,

The mandate you adopt for UNAMA will send a signal from the international community to the Afghan people that they have not been forgotten, and to the Taliban de facto authorities that the world does not desire future conflict in Afghanistan but that they will need to recognize basic standards of global citizenship in order to be accepted by the international community.

If UNAMA is appropriately equipped and empowered by this Council, a busy but worthwhile agenda awaits us. First, addressing the economic crisis that I mentioned earlier. Second, working with the Taliban de facto authorities to ensure strong, vital, high-level education for all girls and boys to help the country move forward. Third, to continue supporting respect for internationally recognized human rights. Fourth, engaging in a discussion about political inclusion to ensure that the concerns of all Afghans in its very rich diversity are reflected in decision-making. Fifth, supporting a structured policy dialogue with the de facto authorities that supports this process of securing domestic legitimacy as well as addresses the key concerns of members of this Council and let me name a few-- counter-narcotics, counterterrorism, and regional security. These elements combined, that I have just mentioned, will allow us to work with the de facto authorities and other Afghans and indeed all of you to establish a pathway for the Afghan state to rejoin the larger international community.



The international community represented by the 15 countries here the Council must make a choice. This Council has the lead decision-making power. Your deliberations and decisions on the mandate in the coming weeks have immense consequences. They will resonate across the region and the world but more importantly they will be felt in every village in Afghanistan.

And if I may, I would like to make a personal plea to the Council, those of us who work for you, stand in admiration of the work that this Council does of the weight of the world that you carry on your collective shoulders and in your collective hearts. As SRSG I recognize how busy your schedule is and the many issues that you are addressing and even the natural internal tensions that happen within any organization. But I would be remiss if I did not remind you that you are about to approach a critical moment in your relationship with Afghanistan. You have the opportunity in the next two weeks to develop and design a much needed, relevant and solid political mission that will help to build back the country, that will help to build the capacity, that will help to attract back the all-important development dollars and will avoid the constant collapse of Afghanistan into a humanitarian crisis. Have not the Afghan people suffered enough? They will need your collective commitment to move the country forward in a political mission supporting all Afghans. Rebuilding is what political missions do, in concert with the authorities and with the citizens of the country. I implore you to give us a strong, solid mandate that will be required. Without it, I fear for the future.

Thank you

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