



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

New York, 09 September 2021

[As delivered]

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Mr. President, Members of the Security Council, and distinguished speakers.

With the fall of Kabul on 15 August the city's population and the people of Afghanistan were confronted with a new and, for many, worrying reality. The Taliban moved into the capital and proclaimed victory, defeating the Afghan Republic that had been in place for the past 20 years. This however was followed by scenes of panic and chaos at Kabul airport as tens of thousands sought to flee Afghanistan by any means available. These scenes, watched around the world, have now been replaced by scenes of protest around the country. They show that the Taliban have won power, but not yet the confidence of all Afghan people.

The new reality is that the lives of millions of Afghans will depend on how the Taliban will choose to govern. But we must ask also ourselves: what can we do and what must we do? The answers I have for you are not comfortable. They present real dilemmas and will require united leadership from the Security Council, from Member States that comprise the Council, from the neighbouring countries, and from the international community more broadly.

We are faced, as of two days ago, with a de facto administration announced by the Taliban.

Those who hoped for, and urged for, inclusivity will be disappointed. There are no women in the names listed. There are no non-Taliban members, no figures from the past government, nor leaders of minority groups. Instead, it contains many of the same figures who were part of the Taliban leadership from 1996 to 2001.

What is of immediate and practical importance to those around this table is that of the 33 names presented, many are on the United Nations sanctions list, including the prime minister, the two deputy prime ministers, and the foreign minister. All of you will need to decide which steps to take regarding the sanctions list, and the impact on future engagement.

Firstly, we must focus on the pre-existing humanitarian crisis, mostly in rural areas, that is indeed worsening as we speak. Addressing this crisis cannot wait for political decisions regarding the removal of sanctions. Millions of ordinary Afghans are in desperate need of help. This means that needed humanitarian aid must be provided through the United Nations or NGOs. There are in addition countries that have their own sanctions that apply to certain members or groups that are now part of the de facto authority. Relevant mechanisms must be found quickly to allow for the United Nations organizations and NGOs to provide the necessary humanitarian relief. In the meantime, we look forward to the high-level conference in Geneva on September 13, which the Secretary-General will convene, that seeks pledges to meet the requirements of the humanitarian appeal on which Afghan lives now depend.



In the current environment the UN role must be clear and build on our humanitarian imperative. There is an immediate and pressing need to deliver, on a huge scale, essential humanitarian aid in areas such as health, food security, non-food items, and sanitation.

Secondly, there is an additional, looming crisis to which I must draw your attention. Billions of assets and donor funds have been frozen by members of the international community. The understandable purpose is to deny these funds to the de facto Taliban administration. Inevitable effect, however, will be a severe economic downturn that could throw many more millions into poverty and hunger, may generate a massive wave of refugees from Afghanistan, and indeed set Afghanistan back for generations. As well, as the Afghan currency plummeted, prices of fuel and food have skyrocketed. Private banks no longer have cash to distribute, meaning even Afghans with assets cannot access them. Salaries cannot be paid. Afghanistan, heavily import-dependent, will be unable to finance its imports of food and medicine, as well as fuel, electricity, and other essential items.

A modus vivendi must be found, and quickly, that allows money to flow to Afghanistan to prevent a total breakdown of the economy and social order. Safeguards must be created to ensure that this money is spent where it needs to be spent, and not misused by the de facto authorities. The economy must be allowed to breathe for a few more months, giving the Taliban a chance to demonstrate flexibility and a genuine will to do things differently this time, notably from a human rights, gender, and counter-terrorism perspective.

Mr. President,

As I mentioned, we are disappointed in the lack of inclusivity of the so-called caretaker cabinet, but the new reality in Afghanistan is in fact still being shaped. A mixed picture has formed in the weeks since the Taliban took power. For the most part, and with some exceptions, the premises of the United Nations in Afghanistan have been respected. We are, however, increasingly worried by the growing number of incidents of harassment and intimidation against our national staff. We will continue to do everything possible to support our staff and keep them from harm's way. The UN cannot conduct its work—work that is so essential to the Afghan people—if its personnel are subjected to intimidation, fear for their lives, and cannot move freely.

We are also concerned that despite the many statements granting general amnesties to ANDSF personnel and those who have worked as civil servants, there have been credible allegations of reprisal killings of ANDSF personnel, and the detention of officials who worked for previous administrations. We have received reports of members of the Taliban carrying out house-to-house searches and seizing property, particularly in Kabul.

And while the Taliban have provided many assurances that they will respect the rights of women within Islam, we are receiving increasing reports where the Taliban have prohibited women from appearing in public places without male chaperones and prevented women from working. They have limited girls' access to education in some regions and dismantled the Departments of Women's Affairs across Afghanistan, as well as targeting women's NGOs.

We are also extremely disturbed at the increasing violence used against Afghans who are protesting Taliban rule. This violence includes shooting above the crowds, persistent beatings, intimidation of media, and other repressive measures. Instead, the Taliban should seek to understand the legitimate grievances of these many Afghans who fear for their futures.



Despite these concerns perhaps we can still help to shape this new reality into a more positive direction. In our initial engagements with Taliban leaders over this past year and in most recent weeks, we have received a clear message that they need and want international assistance. Some indeed have asked for patience and even advice as they attempt to transition from a military insurgency to a government. They have complained that the widespread corruption of previous government officials left many parts of the country without assistance and squandered the generosity of the international community. But they themselves risk squandering the potential generosity of the international community if they govern against the explicit interests and rights of their own people.

Mr. President and Council members,

The impact of these recent developments is also felt beyond the Afghan borders. Many countries around Afghanistan are apprehensive about how Taliban rule will affect their own security. They fear the effect of an expanded Islamic State that the Taliban cannot contain. They fear a wave of refugees coming across their borders. They fear the consequences of the large amount of arms left behind in Afghanistan. They fear that the Taliban will be unable to stem the illegal economy and the flow of drugs from Afghanistan. It is indeed most important now that the region use its available mechanisms to not just speak with one voice but act in concert for the benefit of the entire region. We look forward to the upcoming meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Dushanbe. Other mechanisms include the Extended Troika format created by Moscow, which last met most recently in Qatar in early August, or ad hoc mechanisms such as the regional foreign ministers meeting hosted by Pakistan that took place this week. But it is also important that the wider international community not become irrevocably divided. There is now a more urgent agenda for the regional and international cooperation around Afghanistan. Without it, the negative repercussions will be felt near and far and will be much more difficult to address later on.

A key part of this agenda is counter-terrorism. Al Qaeda members remain in Afghanistan, visibly welcomed and sheltered by the de facto Taliban authorities. Islamic State Khorasan Province remains active and could gain strength. Concerns on these essential matters of international terrorism will not be allayed simply by Taliban promises. On this issue the region and the wider international community share a clear common and critical interest.

Mr. President, Council members,

Of course, the United Nations family remains in Afghanistan, committed to do what we have done for the last seventy-five years, delivering for the people of Afghanistan. What is essential for this effort, and for Afghanistan in general, is a functioning airport in Kabul. We are grateful therefore for the prompt and generous actions taken by Qatar and Turkey to begin restoring the airport, in cooperation with the Taliban, so that it is fully functional and regular commercial flights can resume. Thanks to these efforts, the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service is already in a position to begin making regular flights to Kabul, and UNAMA's own air fleet will soon be able to do so as well. I would also like to thank the Government of Kazakhstan for agreeing on short notice to host a UN satellite office to support our efforts in Afghanistan.

Our commitment to deliver to the people of Afghanistan means that we must engage with the Taliban on operational and security issues. The recent visit of Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths to Kabul earlier this week paved the way to continue discussing the terms of



future humanitarian assistance as well as to prepare the ground for the Geneva conference on the 13th. I cannot express enough my admiration for those UN staff, national and international, who are in Afghanistan now, facing the daily uncertainties. Their presence and their persistence are proof of our ongoing commitment to deliver to the people of Afghanistan.

I would also like to make a final comment on the subject of UNAMA's mandate, which is due for renewal in about a week. You as members of the Security Council are, like us, still evaluating the new situation. I look forward to our ongoing discussions regarding the UN's role in Afghanistan at this critical time and as we move forward.

Mr. President,

The best, and still possible outcome, would be for the Taliban to demonstrate that they seek to create an Afghanistan where people do not live in fear, where those with talents are invited to participate in the rebuilding of their country, and where boys and girls, young women and men, can receive the sort of education that will allow this development to continue. Now is the moment for the Taliban to visibly demonstrate to the people of Afghanistan—to all the people of Afghanistan—that they are committed to each and every one of them, in guaranteeing their safety, their freedoms, their health, their education, and their future prosperity.

The Afghan people are least responsible for this unfolding crisis, and yet most affected by it. It is clear that they will still need this Council and the international community.

Thank you, Mr. President and Council members for your consideration of Afghanistan at this very important time.

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UNAMA supports the Afghan people and government to achieve peace and stability. In accordance with its mandate as a political mission, UNAMA backs conflict prevention and resolution, promoting inclusion and social cohesion, as well as strengthening regional cooperation. The Mission supports effective governance, promoting national ownership and accountable institutions that are built on respect for human rights. UNAMA provides 'good offices' and other key services, including diplomatic steps that draw on the organization's independence, impartiality and integrity to prevent disputes from arising, escalating or spreading. The Mission coordinates international support for Afghan development and humanitarian priorities.