

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Ms. Zubaida Akbar
UN Security Council Briefing on Afghanistan
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President, excellencies and civil society colleagues,

I am Zubaida Akbar, a woman human rights defender from Afghanistan. I deliver my statement today on behalf of Freedom Now, an organization that defends human rights and works directly with twenty grassroots mostly women-led movements inside Afghanistan.

It is my honor and responsibility to brief the Security Council today, on International Women's Day, on the worst crisis for women's rights in the world. As this Council is aware, since the Taliban seized power in August 2021, the rights of Afghan women and girls have been decimated. Through over 40 decrees, the Taliban have sought not only to erase women from public life, but to extinguish our basic humanity.

Let me share with you a few examples of what life is like for Afghan women today.

- It has now been 534 days since teenage girls could go to school and 78 days since women were banned from universities, making Afghanistan the only country in the world where women are prohibited from accessing most forms of formal education, which will be catastrophic for generations to come.
- The Taliban have done everything they can to curb women's freedom of movement and expression. Women cannot travel more than 75 kilometers without a male guardian. Women are banned from public baths, restaurants and parks. Even the UN Deputy Secretary-General and the Executive Director of UN Women were told by the Taliban on their recent visit to Afghanistan that they should not be there without their mahrams and that it was haram for them to sit with the Taliban. They experienced a fraction of what the Taliban is imposing on millions of Afghan women every single day.
- The total collapse of the legal system — and the exclusion of women from what remains of it — means women facing domestic violence have no access to justice.
- Most recently, Taliban fighters prevented the sale of contraceptives. In a country that already has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, women will not only have little choice about whether to have children, but risk their lives to do so.
- A variety of restrictions have been placed on women's right to work. The recent decision to ban women from working for NGOs has led to more than 100 civil society organizations being unable to fully function. While some have resumed work in health and education sectors, it is clear that nothing less than an immediate and unconditional reversal of the ban will ensure that the 28 million Afghans depending on humanitarian assistance, especially women and girls, are able to survive. I want to underline this point. We keep hearing the international community say that it confronts a dilemma in Afghanistan — to save lives, or to call out the Taliban for its violations of women's rights. But I ask you — whose lives are you saving? And at what cost? Pursuing humanitarian action without women, or delivering aid that doesn't reach women, only serves to further eliminate women from society. Humanitarian action must be rights-based and without discrimination. And I urge you to remember that while it may save lives now, it is not a substitute for finding a durable solution to the current crisis.

Women inside Afghanistan tell me they feel suffocated and hopeless. Young girls talk to me about ending their lives.

This cannot continue.

Excellencies, there is one term that appropriately describes the situation of Afghan women today: gender apartheid. Afghan women, experts, and even Secretary-General Guterres have condemned the systematic

discrimination against Afghan women and girls as gender apartheid. Furthermore, the Taliban's human rights violations on the basis of gender amount to gender persecution, a crime against humanity, for which UN experts have called for the Taliban to be investigated and held accountable.

Outspoken international condemnation is critical. But it is not enough. Such flagrant violations of international law, including the provisions of equality and non-discrimination as enshrined in the UN Charter, require a proportional, coordinated and meaningful international response that makes clear that violations of women's rights are intolerable, unjustifiable and that the Taliban will face consequences. If you do not defend women's rights here, you have no credibility to do so anywhere else.

Support for women protestors

Since August 2021, there have been two narratives about Afghanistan — one of the Taliban's takeover, but another about women's resistance. Grassroots, women-led movements have been the most visible and vocal civic opposition to the Taliban so far and risk their lives daily to advocate for the human rights of all Afghans. In the words of one protestor, these women are our ambassadors of freedom.

The Taliban's response to peaceful protests has been violent attacks, imprisonment and torture. Nargis Sadat, a woman protester, was arbitrarily arrested mere weeks ago, on February 12. Her fate remains unknown. Tamana Zaryab Paryani and Parwana Ibrahimkhil were abducted and disappeared after protesting in Kabul, and held for weeks in detention. Nayera Kohistani was arrested along with her child and has detailed abuse and torture in a Taliban prison. Hazara women who protest are treated even more harshly.

The brave civic resistance of Afghan women urgently needs your support. They need you to say their names and take up their cases in your engagement with the Taliban. They need you to demand their release. They need you to grant them asylum. They need you to fund them. And they need you to hold the Taliban accountable when they are detained, tortured, disappeared or killed for demanding their rights. The lack of consequences only emboldens the Taliban to expand their crackdowns with total impunity.

Ethnic and religious groups

The Taliban's all-male, majority Pashtun caretaker cabinet signals that they have no intention of forming an inclusive government that represents either the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan or women, or protecting marginalized ethnic and religious groups.

The Taliban have not only failed to investigate or punish attacks on the Hazara community, they have been directly responsible for mass killings of Hazaras that may amount to war crimes. In November 2022, the Taliban raided a village in Daikundi province and killed 11 Hazaras, including children.

Other groups, such as the Sikh community, have been forced to abandon their homes due to targeted attacks, and members of Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen communities continue to be forcibly displaced, and their lands redistributed to Kuchis and Taliban members. Women in Daikundi and Jawzjan also tell me that the distribution of aid in their communities has been unequal.

The Taliban's brutal return to extrajudicial killings, public floggings and executions is clear evidence that they have not changed since they were last in power. They have no respect for the rights or aspirations of the Afghan people and they have no plans to change. They are imposing an extremist, patriarchal interpretation of Islam that relies on repression of women and marginalized groups.

This is not the path to peace — this is the road to another civil war, one that will not be contained in the region.

I therefore call on the Security Council to take the following actions:

- Demand that the Taliban respect the human rights of all Afghans, including women, girls, LGBTQI+ people and all other marginalized groups, and end all restrictions on women's rights. This means rescinding not only the bans on education and working for NGOs, but all restrictions on women's rights that violate Afghanistan's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

- Be clear that there will be no unconditional engagement with the Taliban until these basic conditions are met. This includes no high-level visits by the UN to Afghanistan without a clear objective informed by the priorities and concerns of Afghan women. I urge you to continue not to grant the Taliban formal recognition of any kind, including a seat at the UN.
- Renew the current mandate for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), as outlined in Resolution 2626 (2022), without any changes, for one more year. UNAMA is already required to address key dimensions of the crisis that are critical for Afghan women and girls, but has, so far, not met the expectations of the people of Afghanistan in fulfilling this mandate. The focus must now be on ensuring that UNAMA fully implements all aspects of this mandate — including on monitoring human rights and prioritizing women’s rights throughout its work. I urge all UN leadership, especially the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, to be outspoken advocates for our rights and ensure that her briefings to this Council prioritize reporting on the situation of women and marginalized groups.
- Ensure that full, equal and meaningful participation of diverse Afghan women civil society and other marginalized groups is front and center in any decision-making regarding the future of Afghanistan, including your own.
- Continue to regularly issue strong statements and resolutions condemning the Taliban’s abuses against women and girls, and ensure that there are no exemptions to travel bans for Taliban leaders. If Afghan women are imprisoned in their homes, the Taliban should not be able to travel.
- The Taliban have violated the rights of my people for over a year with no consequences. I therefore urge you to support initiatives to strengthen accountability for human rights violations, including all forms of gender-based violence, as well as attacks against ethnic and religious communities and other marginalized groups.

The people of Afghanistan deserve their human rights regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. If the Taliban are allowed to continue down this path, it will be generations before Afghanistan recovers. As you deliberate on the future of my country today, I urge you to think of your own daughters, wives, sisters, and ask yourselves — why do Afghan women deserve anything less?

Thank you.