

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Ms. Mariam Safi UN Security Council Briefing on Afghanistan 2 March 2022

Madam President, Excellencies,

Thank you for this opportunity to address you on the situation in Afghanistan. I am Mariam Safi, an Afghan-Canadian, with 15 years of experience working as a researcher and peacebuilding practitioner in Afghanistan.

Before I begin my statement today, I want to express my solidarity with the people of Ukraine—as a people that have suffered conflict for decades, Afghans understand your pain and I salute your resolve.

Today, I brought with me a piece of Afghanistan, a bit of soil that I have kept with me from my first visit in 2007. To me, every grain represents an Afghan woman, man and child—their courage, their aspirations and their sacrifices. Let this soil remind you that Afghanistan is more than images on TV or numbers on a page. It is the tens of thousands of Afghans killed so far, it is the Hazaras and other ethnic groups who continue to be persecuted, the one million children at risk of malnutrition, the 24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, and the dozens of women protestors, civil society and journalists who have been detained, disappeared or killed since 15 August. Your decisions in this chamber affect nearly 40 million lives.

My statement today will focus on priorities for the new mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the humanitarian crisis and the political path forward for Afghanistan.

Following the events of 15 August, the international community has taken some positive steps to support Afghans. The UN is coordinating the largest humanitarian response in recent history. The Security Council renewed the mandate of the Monitoring Team supporting the Afghanistan Sanctions Committee. And the General Assembly deferred the decision to consider the Taliban's request to represent Afghanistan at the UN.

Yet much more remains to be done. As Secretary-General Guterres recently remarked, Afghanistan is hanging by a thread. I would add, so is the credibility of the UN, the Security Council and the international community. Peacebuilding in Afghanistan has been intrusive, externally driven, top-down and technocratic for two decades. Afghanistan has been exploited by powerful countries for their own ends. Instead of supporting Afghans in shaping their own destiny, the international community's approach was short-sighted and undermined local autonomy. This is why we are here today.

Since August, five Afghan women have briefed the Security Council. They told you to stand strong on human rights and inclusive governance, and they warned you of the consequences should you fail to do so.

Today, it is in your power to make decisions that could uplift the people of Afghanistan, the region and the world, and break the cycle of conflict and violence. But you must act now.

UNAMA's mandate

As this Council is well aware, there has been a rapid deterioration of women's rights since the Taliban seized power. You have heard from multiple Afghan women and the UN about restrictions on women's movement, dress, access to education and work. While the Taliban have announced lifting of some of these restrictions, it remains to be seen if they follow through, in practice, on these commitments.

Women's access to justice and due process has been severely curtailed due to the absence of an independent, functioning judicial system. Freedom of expression, along with civic space, has almost entirely disappeared. Nearly 70% of media outlets have closed and 72% of the journalists who have lost their jobs are women.

Repression of women's rights appears central to the Taliban's vision for Afghanistan. Which is why, despite the life and death choices they face, women continue to protest across the country. These are home-grown movements that have persisted despite the Taliban's systematic efforts to harm, detain, and even force them into fake

confessions. As we speak, the Taliban are searching homes and offices in Kabul, spreading fear among ordinary Afghans. This campaign of intimidation should signal to the international community, particularly those who seek to engage the Taliban, that they should be judged by their actions and not their words. Engagement without conditions is complicity.

The Taliban are willing to silence those who criticize them. You as the international community must therefore be clear that you are watching. This is why it is essential for UNAMA to have a robust mandate to monitor and report on human rights and to support the implementation of Afghanistan's international obligations. The Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, while also critical, cannot replace UNAMA or the local infrastructure that existed before August. Without the free functioning of the media and civil society, without the scrutiny of the international community, neither the Taliban's abuses, nor their commitments, can be monitored. UNAMA must therefore have the resources and capacity to extend its reach, and support local organizations to carry out their human rights work.

Most importantly, the Security Council must ensure that UNAMA prioritizes gender equality and the rights of women, *both* their protection and their participation. You will have no one to protect unless you also advocate for the active participation of women in the public and political life of their country. Therefore, I implore the Security Council to ensure that UNAMA has an explicit mandate to support the full, safe, equal and meaningful participation of women across all processes and regularly consults with women and civil society more broadly, including LGBTQI+, youth, victims and all ethnic and religious communities.

Humanitarian response

Today, nearly 60% of Afghans are in need of humanitarian assistance, and an estimated \$4.4 billion is required to provide it. Afghan women's organizations are calling for at least 40% of these funds to be dedicated to women, girls and female-headed households, and for a significant increase in funding to local humanitarian organizations. Moreover, women's participation in delivering humanitarian assistance is essential. The humanitarian response must be carried out in partnership with Afghan civil society, who, if given the resources, are ready to support. It's time the international community returns ownership of such processes to Afghans.

While humanitarian assistance is critical, it cannot take the place of a strong national economy. Development aid is necessary to prevent the collapse of the banking system and to allow ordinary Afghans and local organizations access to much-needed resources.

Excellencies, let me be clear: the recent decision of the United States to split \$7 billion of Afghanistan's frozen assets and keep them from the Afghan people is nothing short of theft. These funds belong to Afghans, and must be returned to them. In order to avoid benefitting the Taliban, the funds can be gradually released to the Central Bank, which should remain independent and managed by a neutral, technical team. Moreover, since taking power, the Taliban have been collecting sufficient revenues, yet civil servants are being paid irregularly. Where is this revenue going? We need transparency on how these funds are being spent, as well as accountability for any additional funds going into the country.

Political path forward

This brings me to my final point.

It has been six months and the Taliban have yet to articulate their vision for a political path forward, nor have they fulfilled their assurances of security. On the contrary, the Taliban maintains close ties with foreign terrorist fighters, mainly through the Haqqani Network and Al-Qaida; ISIS-K has expanded its reach into the country, and the Taliban have created battalions of suicide attackers to integrate into their own defense forces.

Madam President, being in a position of power requires being able to govern, and to do so responsibly. It means being accountable to the people you serve. And having the wisdom to accept should they disagree with you. There are no two ways about it.

The Taliban want an Islamic Emirate, a form of government where power is consolidated in a leader selected by a council, while in the last 20 years, Afghans have experienced life under a democracy, where citizens choose their leaders through elections.

Afghans must have a means to freely express their views, and all Afghans must be represented in any future government. The international community can play an important role in facilitating discussions between Afghans and the Taliban, as well as monitor progress toward this goal. But to do this effectively, you must unite and set clear benchmarks on fundamental issues such as women’s rights, freedom of the press, inclusive governance, and equal representation of men, women, youth, civil society, victims, and LGBTQI+ individuals, from all ethnic and religious communities, which can then be supported and monitored through UNAMA. And the international community must be willing to withhold its support if these benchmarks are not met.

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan recently told the Security Council that the UN was “well-positioned to continue supporting the Afghan people.” Madam President, Council Members, I believe the UN is only well-positioned to do so if it has the courage to uphold its own values—to promote peace and to protect the human rights of all Afghans, including women—even when it is difficult. The UN can only achieve this if you, the Security Council, give it a strong mandate, and your support, to do so.

For years, I held on to this bit of soil to remind me of where I started. While so much has changed, this soil, like the will of the Afghan people, has endured. To my fellow Afghans, let this soil be proof of our resilience, and a banner for our hope.

Thank you.