

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Ms. Mahbouba Seraj UN Security Council Briefing on Afghanistan 26 January 2022

Mr. President, Excellencies,

My name is Mahbouba Seraj, I am an Afghan-American women's rights activist who has been living in Afghanistan since 2003.

Over the last 20 years, the people of Afghanistan — especially women and girls — have fought for equality, human rights, inclusive governance, and peace and security in our country. Yet the hasty exit of the international community from Afghanistan last August has undermined our achievements and dashed our hopes for a democratic nation. The Taliban is once more in control and dismantling our rights daily. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been displaced to countries around the world. And today, in Afghanistan, women are literally being erased from public life, down to the blacking out of women's faces on advertisements and the beheading of female mannequins in shop windows.

My Afghan sisters and I warned the Security Council and broader international community of this possibility for decades. It pains me to be here before you today to affirm this truth. But we will not be silenced, and you have a tremendous responsibility for keeping the promises you have made to us, the women of Afghanistan, over the years.

My statement today will focus on the responsibility of the Security Council, the UN and the international community for keeping Afghan women's rights front and center throughout all deliberations on Afghanistan. I will discuss this in relation to:

- 1) The situation of women's rights;
- 2) The humanitarian crisis;
- 3) The economic and banking crisis; and
- 4) Engagement with the Taliban.

Women's rights

Mr. President,

After 20 years of tasting freedom — working, studying, playing sports, performing music — it has taken less than six months to completely dismantle the rights of women and girls across the country. Schooling for Afghanistan's girls has been jeopardized, especially impacting adolescents and women, the majority of whom are banned from secondary school and university. Many women have fled the country or are prisoners in their own homes, fearful that their religion, ability, sexual orientation or ethnicity might make them a target. Female judges, once celebrated by the international community, are on the run from the very perpetrators they imprisoned.

Women are now required to travel with a *mahram*, or a male guardian. This has not only restricted their basic freedom of movement, but their ability to live their lives. It has prevented women from reaching their health appointments, escaping situations of domestic violence, and seeking employment. In a country where millions of Afghan women are widows, and thus the sole breadwinners for their children, this rule is sabotaging families' survival.

While it feels as though the world has given up on Afghan women, we have not. We are in the streets protesting every day, despite the threats, weapons and the violence. We are fighting for our inclusion, for justice and for an end to the repression of our people. But we need your political support and resources to succeed. We need you to stand by us, and ensure that Afghan women are equal partners in any decision-making regarding the future of

Afghanistan. This includes calling for the Taliban to rescind the *mahram* policy and uphold women's freedom of movement and to ensure we can exercise our right to education, work and health. This includes questioning the Taliban directly about the whereabouts of women human rights defenders like Tamana Zaryab Paryani and Parwana Ebrahim Khel when you hear that they have been taken from their homes for protesting against repressive policies, such as the hijab directive. This means not giving up on asking about the disappearance of Alia Azizi. You cannot be silent about them if you claim to support us in this Council.

Humanitarian situation

Mr. President,

We are in the midst of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. Since the Taliban's takeover, hunger and poverty in Afghanistan have skyrocketed. More than half the population, the highest figure ever seen in Afghanistan, needs urgent food assistance at this very moment. Some families have resorted to selling their children for income. Others are marrying off girls as young as nine so that their dowries might pay for food and urgent healthcare. The Taliban's restrictions on women aid workers' ability to fully carry out their duties¹ and their systematic dismantling of the country's systems to prevent and respond to gender-based violence are endangering women's access to services. Our hospitals lack equipment, medication, including much-needed tests for COVID-19, but also supplies for women's reproductive health. This threatens to increase the already high maternal mortality rate in the country.

As the humanitarian situation has rapidly deteriorated over the last five months, the people of my country have asked what they have done to deserve this. And no one has any answers for them.

It is the responsibility of the Security Council, the international community and the UN to do everything in your power to urgently provide life-saving assistance at the scale needed to avert further suffering. Aid must reach all Afghans, including women, minorities and other marginalized groups. To ensure this, all humanitarian workers, including women, must be able to carry out their work freely, safely and without fear of reprisal. Further, the international community should continue to ensure that humanitarian assistance goes directly to principled humanitarian organizations and local organizations operating on the ground, and is not routed through the Taliban. Women's organizations in Afghanistan must be regularly consulted on the design and implementation of humanitarian operations.

Economy

Mr. President,

While humanitarian assistance is critical to managing short-term needs, the collapsing banking system and economy must also be addressed. Presently, ordinary Afghans who need to withdraw money must wait for hours before collecting what small amount has been permitted that day. The prices of food staples like wheat, oil, rice and sugar continue to rise. Afghans have lost half a million jobs since August, which disproportionately impacts women. Furthermore, the unprecedented brain drain, prompted by the Taliban's takeover in August, has left the country without enough qualified people to get the job done.

Even if the banking system restarts and supply chain demands are addressed, women's engagement in the workforce will be critical to the success of Afghanistan's economy. Women's participation in the labor force has steadily increased since 2009. We were taxpayers, breadwinners and innovators — all critical for the country's economic prosperity. In fact, restricting women's right to work could cost the Afghan economy up to \$1 billion of its GDP. And although the Taliban doesn't fully support our right to work outside the home, the majority of Afghans do. The Security Council, UN and international community must ensure women's right to work in Afghanistan, dedicate funds to supporting and monitoring women and girls' access to education and economic rights, and engage women as partners in developing solutions to the current economic crisis.

¹ This includes banning them from working all together, limiting the kind of work they do, and requiring a mahram.

Engagement with the Taliban

This brings me to my final, but most important, point. The people of Afghanistan, especially its women, see the dilemma the world currently faces regarding how to engage with the Taliban while addressing the present, urgent needs, as well as the future hopes of all Afghans. Ordinary Afghans must not be punished for a crisis they had no part in creating. But equally, the Taliban cannot use the lives of Afghans to hold the international community to ransom. Therefore, it is in our collective interest to ensure there is a robust international presence through the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) who can be the international community's eyes and ears on the ground, monitoring and reporting on developments in the country and whether the Taliban are following through on their bilateral and international commitments. This is especially important at a time where civil society, the media and international NGOs are unable to do so. UNAMA should also play a key role in supporting dialogue with the Taliban for the sake of the Afghan people, and ensure broad and inclusive consultations with Afghans from all parts of the country and all walks of life.

At the same time, the international community must not be afraid to use its important leverage over the Taliban. Human rights, women's rights and accountability must be part of every conversation. In addition, clear conditions must be placed on any economic and political support that is provided to the Taliban to ensure that they address the needs and protect the rights of the population, including its women, girls, minorities and other marginalized groups. You affirmed the importance of upholding all human rights in resolution 2593. Now you must act on it.

Finally, the international community must stop sending all-male delegations to meet with the Taliban. This sends a dangerous signal that you do not value our rights or our views. Sending foreign women is not enough; we must start the process of inclusive governance for and by Afghans. Diverse representation of Afghan women — especially civil society — must be part of all ongoing negotiations with the Taliban.

Mr. President,

I am not the first, nor will I be the last, Afghan woman to address this Council. But this time, I hope members of this esteemed body and the international community more broadly will start to take us seriously.

While we cannot turn back the clock, we can choose to work differently moving forward. Ensuring that Afghan women are meaningfully a part of our country's future is a critical place to start.

Thank you.