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Briefed the North Atlantic Council, NATO HQ

On

“The Peace Process in Afghanistan: Taking Stock of the Challenges and Possibilities through the Lens of Afghan Women, Civil Society Organizations, and Think-Tanks”

Your Excellencies, Deputy Secretary General of NATO, a very good morning and a happy international women's day to you all.

Thank you Madame Deputy Secretary General for giving me the opportunity to address the North Atlantic Council and share my perspectives on the Afghan peace process.

Today, in my capacity as a peace-builder and member of the research community in Afghanistan, I would like to touch on the current trends, conditions on the ground, and key issues relating to the Afghan peace process. The perspectives I will be sharing with you have been deeply informed by a decade of consultations, I have led as part of our efforts at the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies, with diverse sectors, community members, and the brave and resilient women of Afghanistan.

We often hear the phrase: that the Afghanistan of today, is not the Afghanistan of 2001. This is true. In the last 18 years, Afghanistan's progress has been tremendous.

Over the past decade, economic growth has been volatile but rapid, with construction and agriculture the key contributors to economic expansion. And, women make up slightly above 17% of the total national work force in Afghanistan today.

Education enrolment has increased nine fold, from below one million in 2001 to 9.2 million in 2016. The number of schools have surged from 3,400 to 16,400 and teacher investment has become a top priority. Thirty-nine per cent of those enrolled in school are now girls – up from under one per cent during the Taliban regime.

According to The World Health Organization, there is a total of 3,135 health facilities, which ensures access to almost 87% of the population within two hours' distance.



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Military and police forces have been restructured and professionalized, due in part to the assistance of NATO allies and partners who now under a Resolute Support Mission provide crucial training, advising and assistance to both the Defence and Police forces. Soon, we will have a new generation of defense and security forces that will be equipped to lead towards the modernization of the security sector. In particular, Afghan Special Forces and the Air Force are developing into reliable components of Afghanistan's defense. The Ministry of Interior, too has significantly shifted its focus by prioritizing civilian and community-oriented policing. Also, for the first time in the country's history 1.4% of the security sector are occupied by women security personnel- this has been a direct outcome of the international community efforts in Afghanistan supported by the Afghan government's adoption of the United Nations SCR 1325 National Action Plan (NAP) in 2015.

Much has been achieved but much remains to be done in the domains of peace, security, and development- and the involvement of women in these sectors.

Under the Taliban, women and girls were discriminated against in many ways. The Taliban enforced their version of Islamic Sharia law, which saw women and girls being banned from going to school, from working, from leaving the house without a male chaperone, from accessing healthcare delivered by men (which meant since women were forbidden from working, healthcare was virtually inaccessible), and from being involved in politics or speaking publicly.

Women were essentially invisible in public life, imprisoned in their home.

In the years following international intervention, all of this changed. Progress came quickly, and towards equality: a new constitution in 2004 enshrined women's rights in it, and in 2009 Afghanistan adopted the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law.

But the Taliban and other highly conservative insurgent groups still control large parts of the country, and in areas under their control, we still witness brutality, violence and discrimination against women and girls. In 2011, Afghanistan was named 'the most dangerous country' to be a woman- this still remains the situation for many, specially those living in rural areas.

In recent years, Afghanistan has become insecure then ever before. In 2001, we were fighting one group, now we are fighting over 20 regional and international terrorist groups. The Taliban control more territory than at any point since their removal. Moreover, from



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2015 to 2018, we witnessed a gradual increase in the number of fatalities among women and children.

In 2009, 285 women were killed as a result of the ongoing conflict. In 2017 that number rose to 1224. This is extremely alarming. UNAMA recorded 1,355 child casualties in 2018, 89 per cent of civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war are children. The toxic consequences of this conflict, extend from Afghan girls and boys being killed and maimed, to sexual assault, abuse, recruitment and being used by parties to the conflict.

Moreover, the-ongoing conflict has left hundreds of thousands of households without a male breadwinner, and is a key cause for women IDPs. In 2018, on average, 1200 Afghan women, girls, boys and men were displaced each day. IDP women are especially vulnerable, due to social isolation and lack of traditional protective mechanism available to them during displacement. Lack of safety networks also heightens exposure of IDP women to Gender-based-violence, including domestic violence. Health facilities are extremely limited in most IDP areas and those that exists are unable to address women's needs. Young girls are often prevented by their families in IDP camps from attending school due to security, social barriers and distance.

Since 2008, young Afghan girls have also made up, for the very first time, a large segment of those leaving the country. In 2016, our organization conducted a survey among male and female youth on the push and pull factors for migration, and for women insecurity remained the predominate concern followed by corruption, unemployment, poor economy, and weak governance.

Currently, Afghanistan is experiencing a politically dynamic period. There was an unprecedented ceasefire, for the first time in 17 years, offered by the Afghan government and accepted by the Taliban in June of 2018, during the 3 days of Eid festivities. This demonstrated the possibilities for peace in Afghanistan.

While there is wide-spread acknowledgement in Afghanistan that an inclusive and comprehensive peace process is the only realistic route towards long term stability, these voices have also been followed by expressions of deep concern.

Last year, on this day, while speaking before the UNSC I highlighted that 18 years ago, hope had replaced despair as the people of Afghanistan, along with their international partners, began a journey they hoped would lead to peace and stability. But I cautioned that the hope



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was beginning to fade, and today as I stand before you, I will say that hope has not only faded it is slowly transforming into fear.

Both the peace deal with Hizb- I-Islami, signed in September 2016, and the 3-Day cease-fire with the Taliban showed that peace is imaginable in Afghanistan. However, they also showed us how easily actors could sideline the need for community healing, exclude women and civil society engagement and take steps that reinforce a culture of impunity in the pursuit of achieving that peace.

Since the Peace and Reconciliation process first started in 2010, there have been concerns by civil society organizations, think-tanks and women's groups over the lack of political will by the Afghan government and international and regional stakeholders to promote and include women in major phases of the process.

These groups, argued that the peace process was top-down and elite centric. That opinions outside the government and High Peace Council (HPC), the body responsible for overseeing the process, were not adequately considered. The government was also discouraging Track II processes, thus shutting down the one forum in which women had previously been included.

The 16 women serving in the High Peace Council also often lamented of not being listened to by their male counterparts, important information was not shared with them, and when any level of talks were held, they were kept outside.

Moreover, there was no official, standardized mechanism for accessing information about the peace process for those women outside of this council, and very little information, awareness and consensus building trickled down to those women living in rural areas.

The peace process in Afghanistan has focused more on technical and operational achievements and challenges, while deprioritizing any social or cultural concepts and implications this will have on those who will have to live it, particularly women.

Patriarchal socio-cultural stereotypes of women as victims and uncritical advocates for peace, combined with a strict division of labour in the public and private spheres, prevented, and continues to, prevent women from entering official peace processes. Despite these barriers, the recent engagement of women in the sit-in peace tents in the restive province of Helmand, illustrated that these obstacles can no longer hold women back- women in Helmand spoke up against the conflict and went, without fear or retaliation, to local Taliban commanders demanding a cessation of hostilities.



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The recent momentum in the peace process caused by the direct talks that have begun between the US and the Taliban, have been seen as a positive step but the rapid pace, agenda of talks, and lack of Afghan voices in these discussions, have also given rise to a new set of concerns for women.

These concerns go beyond highlighting the importance of women's direct participation in the peace process- it concerns their demands on how this process should be led to ensure inclusivity and how it should unfold to ensure sustainability.

The US-Taliban talks are viewed as being based on a narrow agenda, namely the withdrawal of foreign troops and assurances by the Taliban that they will not allow Afghan soil to be used against US interests, this is seen by many as setting the ground for a hasty withdrawal that will jeopardize for Afghans the future of hard-won gains such as women's Constitutional rights, freedoms of citizens and democratic institutions.

US-Taliban talks are also considered to have sidelined the Afghan State and the voices of women's groups, civil society and ethnic minorities, increasing fears among the most vulnerable— about the loss of freedoms that Afghanistan's young democracy has afforded them.

Women's groups and civil society organizations are also question that when, and if, US-Taliban talks are able to open up a window for an Intra-Afghan Dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan state including political party leaders and other national stakeholders- will this forum be able to ensure unity of approach based on a national consensus, inclusivity and gain legitimacy from the public.

And lastly, there is insufficient clarity on the ultimate political objectives of the main parties, the Taliban in particular. In recent interviews with the group, Taliban leaders have spoken about "running" the country in a post-agreement. In their Moscow statement, they have called for a revision of the Constitution and the lack of clarity on which articles they would revision- has been a significant source of fear. They also stated that the group will not stop Afghan women from going to schools, universities and work but in my conversations with Afghan women who attended the Moscow talks, the Taliban told them, a woman may serve in a political office but cannot become a judge or president.

According to the Women's Peace Jirga, held on February 28, a declaration was released representing the views of 15,000 women from all 34 provinces in the country, in which



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women demanded for the Constitution to be a redline in these talks, they stated, “*The Afghan Constitution is our national compact...Therefore, a peace that is in compliance with the Constitution and preserves the government system/institutions, territorial integrity of the country and the achievements of the last one and half decades is the only acceptable kind of peace.*”

Your Excellencies, I would like to conclude my remarks by underscoring the vital role NATO allies and partners have played in building a strong Afghanistan.

I have personally been apart of various consultations, roundtables and seminars that NATO’s Senior Civilian Representatives office in Kabul has organized with Civil Society Organizations, Think-Tanks and women’s groups as a means to raise voices that may otherwise go unheard in decision-making circles. Thus to harness this cooperation, I present to you the following key recommendations:

1. NATO allies and partners, must take steps to deepen its engagement in support of grass-roots consensus building amongst all sectors of Afghan society on key concerns related to the peace process such as the red lines for negotiations; the role of justice in an eventual settlement; the protection and role of women; and the way forward after a peace agreement is reached.
2. NATO allies and the Office of the Special Civilian Representative for Resolute Support, is urged to maintain and further strengthen its engagement with women's groups, local think-tanks and civil society organizations.
3. NATO allies must increase their contribution towards the effective implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 through their engagement with the Afghan government & relevant stakeholders.
4. While Afghans applaud the international community’s stance on supporting the “Afghan-led and Afghan –owned” peace process, there is a need for a strong third-party mediator and international community advisory/observer group to monitor the implementation of any political settlement reached with the Taliban.



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5. A phased withdrawal must also be contingent upon all parties involved in talks upholding and protecting the democratic gains of the post-2001 Afghanistan.
6. Any strategy by international donor's during and a post-peace agreement must be aligned with Afghanistan's development priorities to help generate greater revenue, continue delivering services and create long-term employment.
7. Afghan, Taliban, and international stakeholders involved in the development of the provisions of a ceasefire must ensure that women's groups and women in the security sector are included in all stages of the development, implementation and monitoring of a ceasefire.

Madame Deputy Secretary General, Afghanistan's international partners have repeatedly expressed their intention and will to continue to stand behind the people of Afghanistan to bring lasting peace, security and stability. But, today I urge you to stand beside **us**, and not behind **us**, as we navigate this critical juncture and together shoulder the responsibilities for sustainable withdrawal, a comprehensive peace agreement and a progressive forward moving Afghanistan.

Thank you.