

**Security Council**

Distr.: General
3 September 2021

Original: English

Letter dated 2 September 2021 from the Permanent Representatives of Ireland, Mexico and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Ireland and Mexico, as Co-Chairs of the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council, and in close cooperation with the United Kingdom, would like to share the summary note of the meeting of the Informal Expert Group on the situation in Afghanistan (see annex).

We would be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) **Geraldine Byrne Nason**
Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations

(Signed) **Juan Ramón de la Fuente Ramírez**
Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations

(Signed) **Barbara Woodward**
Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 2 September 2021 from the Permanent Representatives of Ireland, Mexico and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council

Summary of the meeting on the situation in Afghanistan held on 19 August 2021

On 19 August 2021, the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council convened a meeting on the situation in Afghanistan. The members received a briefing from the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (Political) for Afghanistan in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Mette Knudsen, and the Deputy Representative in Afghanistan of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), Alison Davidian, accompanied by colleagues from their teams. The meeting concluded with an overview of key recommendations provided by UN-Women and additional observations shared by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. Several members of the Security Council were represented by their deputy permanent representative or their political coordinator.

Questions from Security Council members

Members of the Security Council asked questions about the commitment of the Taliban to uphold women's rights, the position of non-Taliban actors towards women's rights, the situation of women and girls outside Kabul, reports of sexual violence and forced and child marriage, ways to ensure girls' access to education, and ways to maintain women's and girls' access to humanitarian aid and health services, including sexual and reproductive health services. Other questions were focused on the role of the United Nations in the protection and evacuation of women at risk, ways for the Security Council to protect those women and the ability of the United Nations to monitor and report violations of women's rights.

Main points raised in the meeting:

- Since the Taliban took control, the situation has been uncertain; the briefers warned that the humanitarian crisis would deepen and human rights abuses would multiply. The Taliban has sought to increase security in the cities but the past days have shown that there are challenges in maintaining order, in particular around the airport in Kabul, where the situation is deteriorating. In a vicious cycle, people storming the airfields trying to get on an aeroplane are a challenge to evacuation efforts. One participant reported that a leading activist who given a briefing to the Security Council in the past, spent many hours at the airport with her young children, unable to get on a flight despite having secured an emergency visa.
- Political instability persists and it is not clear whether minorities or individuals who have previously held key positions in government will continue to do so. The recently formed transition coordination council, which includes former President, Hamid Karzai, the Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, and the leader of the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin political party, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, has met with the Taliban to discuss transition modalities. However, there are indications that a more hard-line branch of the Taliban does not wish to include these figures in a future government. Meanwhile, the Vice-President, Amrullah Saleh, has proclaimed himself interim President after the departure of President Ghani.

- The situation of women in the country is very difficult to assess at the moment and many reports of abuses cannot be verified. While four UNAMA field offices are still open, the Mission's monitoring ability is hampered by the fact that local staff is advised to stay at home until the security situation improves and that civil society organizations and journalists with whom the mission has cooperated in the past have to keep a low profile. The briefers emphasized the importance of women's participation in human rights monitoring and encouraged Council members to advocate for the use of Human Rights Council mechanisms to monitor human rights violations, including the impact of the Taliban's rule on women's rights.
- At their first press conference, held in Kabul on 17 August, the Taliban reiterated vague statements about their vision of women's rights. The group said that women would be allowed to study, work and participate in public life "within the framework of Islam", but has not yet explained what that entails. Meanwhile, reports indicate discrepancies between those promises and the realities on the ground. In some areas, the Taliban have reimposed policies that were commonplace during their previous rule. In various districts under Taliban control, women have been told to refrain from going to work and girls' and mixed schools have been closed. Furthermore, women and girls are prohibited from leaving the house without a male chaperone and are instructed to wear a burka. The briefers warned that those restrictions had a serious impact on women's rights, including their access to health care. In several locations, the Taliban have reportedly threatened that violation of those rules would result in harsh punishment. There are already reports of women being flogged and beaten in public, and even shot and killed, such as in the case of a women's rights activist on 3 August for breaching those rules. Participants stressed that oppressive gender norms were at the core of the Taliban's stance and that there was a direct link between the Taliban's control of an area and reports of a rollback of women's rights.
- However, governance practices of the Taliban vary from one place to another and there are reports of alleged instructions for girls to return to schools and women teachers to return to work. At Herat University, there have been meetings between student leaders and Taliban authorities in which it was stated that female students could return to the university if they wore a hijab and Islamic studies were included in the curriculum. Female university staff have also reportedly been ordered to return to work.
- There are worrying reports of conflict-related sexual violence in Taliban-controlled areas, but they are difficult to verify. Even before the recent developments there was chronic underreporting of conflict-related sexual violence, which will now be exacerbated. Participants also recalled that, as documented in the reports of the Secretary-General on sexual violence in conflict, sexual violence crimes had been attributed not only to the Taliban but also to the Afghan security forces, who had since disbanded. In other contexts, the large influx of fighters into urban areas in proximity to civilian populations typically contributes to increases in sexual violence, and people may resort to child and forced marriage as a negative coping mechanism. The Taliban issued a statement ordering its fighters not to engage in forced marriage, but participants cautioned that it was already evident that the Taliban did not have complete command and control over their forces. Reports of the Taliban engaging in child and forced marriage will further increase the aversion and antagonism of the population towards the group. Participants also recalled the role of Al-Qaida and ISIL, and warned that the use of sexual violence by those groups as a tactic of terrorism and a method to achieve their strategic objectives,

including recruitment and financing through sexual slavery and trafficking, could also increase.

- There are some indications of pushback against the Taliban, including demonstrations in which there were calls for the preservation of women's rights. On 17 August, a small group of women gathered in Kabul to call for the protection of women's rights, education, employment and political participation. Videos on social media show that Taliban fighters did not interrupt the protest. Yet hundreds of activists, journalists and civil society leaders, especially women, as well as female professionals, are facing threats, surveillance and arrest. The briefers appealed to the Security Council members to provide immediate support to women human rights defenders and to continue to publicly condemn violence against them.
- Participants announced that the United Nations Population Fund would reopen its sexual and reproductive health centres across the country and noted that access to health centres could sometimes be easier to negotiate at the local level. They also emphasized the importance of advocacy for women's health centres to stay open.
- The briefers stressed the need to advocate strongly for the participation of women in all aspects of public life and the preservation of the women and peace and security agenda when negotiating with the Taliban. If women stop going to work to deliver life-saving services, women and girls will not seek such services because of cultural norms and practices that prevent women from engaging with men who are not their relatives. The speakers warned that if that scenario played out, access to half of the population would be lost. They appealed to participants to advocate for the participation of women in public life and for female humanitarian workers to be able to carry out their work.
- Finally, participants emphasized the importance of the Security Council maintaining a high level of engagement. They recalled that exemptions to the travel ban under the sanctions regime had been granted on condition of participation in peace negotiations and encouraged the Security Council to tie any travel ban exemptions to the need to protect and promote women's rights. The briefers urged Council members to measure the commitments of the Taliban based on their actions rather than their words.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made by UN-Women, as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group.¹

- (a) The Security Council should adopt a resolution in response to the latest developments. It should consider the following elements:
 - (i) Calls for an immediate, nationwide ceasefire that fully incorporates gender considerations, including the protection of women;
 - (ii) Urges all Member States to facilitate and expedite the departure and relocation of Afghans who wish to leave the country, with particular attention to women at risk or targeted, including women in civil society and in public life;

¹ These recommendations are suggestions by United Nations participants in this meeting or from the background note prepared by the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group ahead of the meeting; they are not recommendations from the Informal Expert Group as a whole or from Council members.

(iii) Calls on the Taliban to respect Afghanistan's international obligations and the rights of women and girls, including their freedom of movement and the protection of their civic space;

(iv) Calls on the international community to urgently fund the humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan and demands that full, unimpeded access to humanitarian aid for all Afghans, including women and girls, be guaranteed and respected, as well as the participation of women humanitarian and frontline workers in aid delivery;

(b) With regard to the mandate of UNAMA, which expires mid-September, the Security Council should consider the following:

(i) Requests UNAMA to take fully into account gender considerations as part of priority tasks and as a cross-cutting issue throughout its mandate and to meaningfully support, engage with and consult with a wide range of diverse women's civil society organizations, networks and women-led organizations, community groups, women human rights defenders and women in the diaspora in all areas of its work;

(ii) Condemns threats, attacks and killings of women, including women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, journalists and women in the public sector, and requests that UNAMA monitor those violations;

(iii) Calls on all parties to the conflict to fully uphold women's rights, including all political, economic and social rights, as well as Afghanistan's commitments to international human rights conventions;

(c) When renewing the sanctions regime later this year, the Security Council should consider the following: including a listing criterion related to the restriction and violations of human rights, in particular women's rights as protected under international human rights law, including conflict-related sexual violence, in the name of or on behalf of the Taliban; requesting the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team to integrate gender as a cross-cutting issue across its investigations and reporting; and requesting the Monitoring Team to include the necessary gender expertise.

In addition, the Co-Chairs of the Informal Expert Group and other Council members should:

(a) Provide immediate practical support to women at risk, including by providing access to diplomatic and political channels, granting emergency visas, organizing emergency evacuations and calling for a halt to any deportations of Afghan refugees already outside the country;

(b) Engage in strategic high-level political diplomacy and advocacy in support of women's full, equal and meaningful participation in any peace and security processes involving Afghanistan;

(c) Provide direct financial support to women-led local peacebuilding initiatives, grassroots movements and civil society organizations, including through long-term and flexible funding and the facilitation of alliance-building among women's networks, and support to their advocacy efforts through capacity-building and reinforcement of advocacy messages;

(d) Publicly condemn violence against women, including human rights defenders and women in professional and public service roles, and express support for their invaluable work.

The Co-Chairs thanked all participants and committed themselves to following up on the important issues raised at the meeting.