

Achieving the goals of the peace agreement in Afghanistan

Thank you very much, Madam President. Let me also welcome today our briefers, SRS Lyons and Executive Director Waly, who I think are making their first appearances in their new roles.

Madam President, there are two preeminent priorities facing Afghanistan today: pursuing peace and tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.

On peace, let me say how much the United Kingdom welcomes the progress made towards intra-Afghan negotiations since our last meeting. These will be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led negotiations. And for the United Kingdom's part, we stand ready support in any way we can. And we note with appreciation the United Nations' readiness to do likewise.

What is most crucial, Madam President, is that they start and they start without delay.

Now, the political agreement between President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah in May was an important and welcome step in this direction. The government has shown strong, unified leadership in its commitment to the release of Taliban prisoners. More of this strong, unified leadership will be essential for the next stage of the peace process and also to address the COVID-19 pandemic, to which I will return. I would like to urge President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah to finalise the formation and appointments of the new government quickly.

Madam President, the Taliban too, must show that they are a credible partner for peace. We welcome that they have released prisoners as well and remain committed to negotiations. However, the United Kingdom condemns in the strongest terms the recent upswing in violence, for which the Taliban is primarily responsible and which undermines trust in the Taliban's sincerity about peace.

The United Kingdom's message to the Taliban is threefold:

First, reduce violence now. Previous occasions – most recently, the Eid ceasefire – shows that you, the Taliban, are capable of doing so. The question is one of willingness.

Second, fulfil the commitment to counter-terrorism, break completely with all terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, and condemn all acts of terrorism in Afghanistan.

And third, engage in good faith in the upcoming intra-Afghan negotiations. This includes accepting the inclusive negotiating team of the Afghan Government.

My final remark on peace is to restate the centrality of inclusion and human

rights to peace. I know that Ms Akbar said that this is not an optional 'nice to have'. This is at the core of Afghans' aspirations for a lasting peace in their country. That means that any peace settlement must protect and build on the progress made in recent years, including on freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression and the rights of women, minorities and children. And let me record the United Kingdom's strong support for the conclusions on children in armed conflict in Afghanistan this Council adopted last week.

Women's effective and meaningful participation in the peace process and in governance is particularly important. And as Co-Chair of the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan, the United Kingdom remains and will remain a strong advocate for women at and in all levels of decision-making.

Madam President, all of this is happening against the backdrop of the Global COVID-19 pandemic. We share the deep concern about the pandemic's impact in Afghanistan – both the immediate health impacts and the secondary socio-economic effects. The United Kingdom is already providing assistance to implement the most urgent parts of the United Nations' humanitarian response plan and to provide water, food and sanitation.

As one of the largest international donors in Afghanistan, we're also working closely with Finland and UNAMA, co-organisers of the Ministerial Pledging Conference due to take place in November this year. The international donor community must redouble its efforts to ensure that support is available and channelled effectively to help Afghanistan weather the pandemic and build back better on a long-term, sustainable footing.

Madam President, there is no doubt that these challenges are daunting. But at a time when the world is united in common cause to fight COVID-19, Afghans have an unparalleled opportunity to unite in securing lasting peace and security in Afghanistan. It is, of course, for Afghans to seize that opportunity and for this Council, the United Nations and Afghanistan's friends to provide all the support that we can. And the United Kingdom is committed to doing our part.

Thank you very much, Madam President.