

Reaching a sustainable political settlement in Afghanistan

Thank you, Madam President. Thank you to Special Representative Lyons and Ms Akbar for their briefings, and to Ambassador Raz for her statement.

I want to emphasise three points that have come up in many of our discussions already.

First, it is important that ongoing peace efforts are accompanied by a reduction in the continuing, appalling violence in Afghanistan. And the Taliban we know is responsible for the largest proportion of this violence.

We welcome the Security Council's press statement of 12 March. This sent a strong message calling for the Taliban, and other perpetrators, to bring an immediate end to targeted assassinations of state officials, civil society activists and journalists, which have sought to undermine ongoing peace efforts. The international community should continue to reinforce this message.

We should be clear to the Taliban: if they want a political role in Afghanistan's future and relief from sanctions, they must make substantive progress in negotiations, end the violence, and break fully from terrorism, including from Al-Qaeda.

Second, we support the renewed urgency that US diplomatic efforts have injected into the peace process.

We welcome efforts aimed at forging a consensus on peace amongst countries in the region.

We also welcome the appointment of Jean Arnault as the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Afghanistan and Regional Issues.

We hope that Mr Arnault will build on the strong foundations that you have laid already, Special Representative Lyons, and that together your work will enhance the role of the UN both in the peace process and on the ground in Afghanistan.

At this important moment, it is essential that Afghan parties seize the opportunity to work towards reaching a sustainable political settlement.

The international community too should seize the opportunity to support these efforts towards peace and for humanitarian relief.

Third, the outcome of the Afghan peace negotiations is for Afghans themselves to decide.

But let's be clear: to be sustainable, peace negotiations in Afghanistan and peace in Afghanistan should be inclusive and it should preserve the rights

and freedoms of all Afghans, including women, youth and minorities.

The parties to peace negotiations should be aware that the level of support from the international community, including international donors, will be affected by the degree to which these are upheld.

For the UK's part, we will continue to advocate in particular for the protection of the rights of women and their participation in the peace process, and I was delighted to co-chair an event held by the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan with Ambassador Raz on this subject last week.

Afghanistan has a rare opportunity for peace. We should be in no doubt about the challenges ahead. But we remain hopeful that Afghanistan can become a more stable, peaceful and prosperous nation.

As the Security Council and as friends of Afghanistan, we must redouble our collective efforts to make that a reality.

Thank you, Madam President.