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Written statement* submitted by The Next Century Foundation, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1 February 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



The way forward for sustainable peace in Afghanistan

The Next Century Foundation welcomes the first co-signed written agreement between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban in nineteen years of war. However, we are disturbed to hear that the Biden administration will no longer commit to a full drawdown of troops from Afghanistan by May because the Taliban have not honoured the commitments they made in their deal with the United States of America.

We now urge the Taliban to consider a power sharing government for the future that is based on the efforts of both the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban to compromise for the greater good.

There are obstacles to peace in Afghanistan, not limited to but including widespread targeted killing of civilians, rules preventing women from accessing basic rights such as the right to education and healthcare, and the increasing production and export of both opium and synthetic drugs.

Afghanistan has faced rapid urbanisation. Urbanisation heightens local tensions and highlights issues relating to weak governance. State legitimacy has been eroded over the years because of increasing violence, precarious state provision of security and the inability of the state to provide good governance such as policing, rule of law, and the provision of justice. Between the years 1988 and 2018, the population of Kabul grew by 182%, reaching just about four million. With such a rapidly expanding population competition developed between the government and the Taliban as each tried to gain the support of the population by providing some semblance of services to them.

Corruption

The corrupt relationship between warlords and government officials has halted development in the country. One of many examples was the stopping of construction of vital highways across the Shomali plain, north of Kabul. This was because corrupt warlords were able to stop the entire project because of their exclusion from it. Instances like this are de-stabilising efforts at creating good governance and infrastructure, which are crucial. The Taliban's correct assessment of the high levels of corruption in the Afghan government has been a limiting factor in their willingness to cooperate with the government.

The Next Century Foundation urges both parties to work to eradicate corruption in Afghanistan so that all willing to do so can cooperate without any inhibitions and work to reconstruct the country. If the government and the Taliban are able to cooperate at the peace talks in Doha, they should be able to prioritise reducing corruption, in order to provide basic amenities for the population.

Violence

The Next Century Foundation is concerned about the continued increase in the number of attacks in Afghan cities despite the peace talks. We urge the Taliban to stick to the agreement signed in February 2020 between the United States of America (US) and the Taliban, wherein they committed to reducing violence in the state in return for reduced US troop numbers in Afghanistan. We urge the Taliban to commit to reducing daily occurrences of violence so as to bolster support from the people for peace talks. The two parties should negotiate a long-lasting ceasefire that ends the attacks in Afghan cities.

Women

A reduction in levels of violence is also crucial for the advancement of women's rights. The Next Century Foundation strongly urges the negotiating parties in Doha to not just include this matter on their agenda but prioritise it. So far it has been neglected. Over years of conflict, women have borne the brunt of the violence, a burden which has been heightened

by the Coronavirus-19 pandemic, because of which children are missing crucial months of schooling and unfortunately women confined at home are facing higher rates of gender based violence. Many girls are kept from leaving their homes and travelling to school by the constant threat of violence and explosions, as well as due to prior restrictions put into place by the Taliban. The constant violence has also destroyed many hospital buildings, making it more difficult than it already was for women to seek access to trained doctors and hospital facilities when the need arises. The lack of governance and constant turmoil has additionally limited rebuilding. The Next Century Foundation asks the Taliban to use this opportunity to repeal any rules restricting access to basic freedoms for women and instead promote the role they play in society by encouraging women to attend school and university and seek employment.

Drugs

Stability in Afghanistan will help provide sustainable employment, which is necessary for people who faced no choice but to turn to the opioid industry for income.

Opium production is by no means new to Afghanistan but the drug industry's pivot to now include the production and exporting of other synthetic drugs is one that is worrying. The Next Century Foundation is concerned that as in the past, the lack of alternative forms of stable employment will keep opium producers dependent on this industry. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghanistan unfortunately owes six to eleven percent of its gross domestic product to the opiate economy. It is important that suitable alternative jobs are made available to help wean poppy producers off the drugs industry rather than merely banning opium production. We encourage the government and the Taliban to work together to create policies that will help transition Afghanistan's economy away from being dependent on drug production.

The International Role

Finally, The Next Century Foundation calls on the international community, in particular Afghanistan's regional neighbours India and Pakistan, to support the peace process in any capacity they can. The violence that often spills over out of Afghanistan has made the need for peace a matter of geo-political balancing.

Specifically, the new administration in the United States of America could and should put pressure on the government of Pakistan to ensure that Pakistan is encouraged, possibly by financial incentive, to put pressure in turn on the Taliban to honour the outcome of the Doha talks. Pakistan is the only nation with extensive influence in this regard.

We also urge the international community to continue paying attention to and calling out key issues such as the lack of women's rights and the increasing production of drugs, in order for them to not be forgotten. Over the years, despite the ongoing conflict, help from the international community has been vital in improving the living and health conditions of many Afghans. We encourage all nations involved to help bolster rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. Continuing international aid will help ensure that the Afghan government is given the time it needs to reform key structures and systems and gradually replace international aid and support with its own internal systems and means for providing for the people of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a country facing a host of problems, all needing to be prioritised. However, the Next Century Foundation believes that ensuring a ceasefire first and foremost, followed by a power sharing government and the implementation of systems to develop a stable governing structure, will greatly help. Constant support from the United Nations and the rest of the international community will ensure that any peace negotiated in Doha will be sustainable and truly committed to resolving the conflict in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The Next Century Foundation proposes five key recommendations for the way forward:

1. We call upon the US to fulfil its obligation to the Afghan people by ensuring that a sustainable peace deal is reached and not abandon Afghanistan prematurely in terms of its military and economic support. If economic support does not continue the Afghan government will collapse.
2. We call upon the Afghan government and the elite in Kabul to unify and work to achieve peace with the Taliban, making more personal sacrifices for the greater good of the Afghan people.
3. We urge the Taliban to reduce the current level of violence and prove they are willing to make concessions in order to achieve peace in Afghanistan.
4. Comprehensive measures must be taken to ensure that women are allowed access to basic human rights and freedoms. The Taliban need to show the world that they have changed their attitude as a result of the civil war and that they are willing to contribute to making Afghanistan a secure and prosperous nation.
5. We encourage neighbouring countries to further cooperate with Afghanistan and help transform Asia into the leading economic trade hub it has the potential to be. An unstable Afghanistan leaves the region unstable as well as posing significant risks to neighbouring countries.

Finally, the Next Century Foundation would like to address the Afghan people and say that they must take responsibility for securing their future by uniting and supporting the peace process in any possible way. This is an opportunity that may not arise again in the foreseeable future. The eventual goal of this process must be for it to be Afghan led and Afghan owned.
