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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

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.

[23 August 2023]

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



A Roadmap to Peace: Afghanistan's Path Forward

Afghanistan faces a critical moment in its history and requires urgent global attention. The humanitarian crisis has worsened, affecting 28 million people, who now need immediate aid. This crisis is exacerbated by concerning limitations on women's employment, education, and press freedom. While progress includes the successful ban on poppy farming, a significant counter-narcotics achievement, and an end to the formally rampant levels of crime, corruption, and kidnapping, challenges for lasting stability persist, especially when it comes to securing women's rights and journalists' safety.

A multifaceted approach is required to navigate the path towards peace in Afghanistan. Efforts should encompass:

1. Regaining and maintaining global attention and relevance
2. Supporting education for girls and women
3. Ensuring the safety and empowerment of Afghan journalists and media personnel
4. Creating a dialogue with the Afghan de facto government and translating that dialogue into concrete action

First Step: Regaining Global Relevance

Currently, the Russian Federation, China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Türkiye, Pakistan, Qatar, and the Kazakhstan have diplomatic missions in Afghanistan. In addition, a number of countries have handed over the embassies of Afghanistan to the diplomats of "the Islamic Emirate".

However, key Western countries have not provided specific conditions for recognition.

The Next Century Foundation very strongly recommends that the remaining UN Security Council permanent members (P5) –France, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America – indicate to Afghanistan their conditions for recognition.

We recommend the key condition for recognition be supporting female education, including university admission.

We recommend the subsequent condition for a full exchange of ambassadors be allowing a return to the workplace for all women who hold contracts for public sector employment.

This move would elevate Afghanistan's global standing, showcase its dedication to international engagement, foster dialogue and collaboration on shared concerns, and alleviate the isolation resulting from the Taliban's de facto control.

Second Step: Ensuring the Safety and Empowerment of Afghan Journalists

Considering Afghanistan's pursuit of international recognition, and of the removal of de facto sanctions in the form of international banking restrictions, a compelling proposal emerges: link these objectives with press freedom and women's rights through negotiation and dialogue.

The de facto government of Afghanistan must be accountable for human rights violations against journalists and media workers.

We urgently ask Western donor nations to provide immediate and ongoing technical and financial support to Afghan media outlets, an action critical for preserving press freedom amidst widespread financial struggles. The closure of numerous outlets due to these challenges hampers effective communication of ongoing developments. Western support can rejuvenate local media, enhancing coverage and understanding of current events.

We urge the creation of a robust, global media monitoring system, in response to escalating threats to Afghan media. Despite promises of press freedom, independent outlets have closed, censorship is rampant, journalists are intimidated, and reporters are detained under the new government. To effectively tackle these issues, establishing an international media monitoring mechanism is imperative to actively monitor media activities and promptly report violations.

We call for comprehensive investigations into attacks on Afghan journalists and collaboration with the de facto government, international organizations, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to ensure accountability. UNAMA should devise policies and strategies addressing sources of violence against media professionals.

Third Step: Dialogue with the De Facto Government of Afghanistan

We urge the Afghan de facto government and global actors to engage in ongoing dialogue, lifting Afghanistan from isolation and facilitating reconnection with global politics, economics, and diplomacy. Other nations and organisations would also benefit from this dialogue, stabilizing the region, reducing violence and suffering, curbing the refugee crisis, and fostering regional economic growth and investment.

We urge Qatar to expand its diplomacy in Afghanistan, due to its relative autonomy regarding foreign policy decisions, and its previous successes engaging with and facilitating talks between the Taliban and the United States of America. We also suggest Qatar encourage the Doha-based Islamic Forum for International Humanitarian Law to seek dialogue with the Taliban to discuss points including interpretations of the Sharia laws in compliance with International Humanitarian Law. We ask Qatar to provide safe spaces for de facto government members to engage with negotiators and communicate suggestions and solutions to stabilise the region. The dialogue facilitators and negotiators should also be in communication with other global actors who can aid the situation in Afghanistan. We further appeal to regional civil society organisations including the Afghan Red Crescent Society, Afghan Civil Society Forum, Afghan Women's Network, the Aga Khan Foundation, the Kabul Institute for Peace, Kabul University, the Pashtun Studies Centre, as well as Kandahar-based religious and political figures including Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada. We urge them and the facilitating countries to work together to enter into talks with the de facto government of Afghanistan and create open and honest dialogues.

Fourth Step: Turn Dialogue into Action

The final steps in our roadmap are the implementation of any results and solutions that have come out of successful negotiations.

The Afghan de facto government could invest in schools to be built or improved upon in both urban and rural areas, promote national teacher training, and ensure financial security for teachers to incentivise them to start or return to teaching. The de facto government should push for secondary-school education for girls to be reinstated nationwide. Female students should be allowed to return to the universities, and Kabul University, being one of the oldest universities in the country, must lead by example: university staff must ensure that women are not harassed within or on their way to university grounds, they should encourage female students to speak up in class, and ensure an education free of gender discrimination.

Those P5 nations who have not already done so (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, France and the United States of America), should now in turn recognize the de facto government of Afghanistan.

Fifth Step: Female Employment

To implement the improvements of women's rights in Afghanistan, the Afghan de facto government needs to change the approach to and treatment of women by altering the national laws regarding employment, education, and freedom of movement.

Regarding women in employment, organisations, businesses, and institutions across the country should reinstate female employees and allow them to return to the workplace in person. The de facto government of Afghanistan should employ women again in positions in the public sector. To facilitate this, we ask that the rule that all women must have a male relative escorting them whenever they leave the house be reconsidered. This rule is a violation of the human right to freedom of movement, and it impedes the possibility of women freely returning to their work and education. It can further be seen as a burden to the men required to accompany their female relative, as it equally limits their ability to go about their lives freely.

To ensure that these laws are actively applied everywhere will require a public appeal to change current practice, and we ask the Afghan de facto Ministry of Justice, de facto Ministry of Interior Affairs, and significantly the de facto Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice to take appropriate and far-reaching steps. The extent to which the restrictive and even violent treatment of women has infiltrated the society of Afghanistan is disturbing. The Afghan de facto government and law enforcement need to ensure that women do not suffer discrimination in public and in private spaces.

Sixth Step: Banking

To support these changes, we ask the international community to continuously support Afghanistan with financial help, investments, and other support that would ensure that the SWIFT banking system operates smoothly. We further urge that the international banking restrictions be lifted: the de facto sanctions on the major banks operating in Afghanistan, including AIB, Azizi, Ghazanfar, and AUB must be lifted, and transaction charges must be reduced to allow international transactions to be resumed and allow Afghans to engage in the global economy. We also ask that the frozen assets of the Afghan de facto government be lifted which includes reserves frozen by the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Germany in the Afghan Fund in Switzerland. With this renewed financial mobility, we ask the de facto government of Afghanistan to implement the changes and improvements detailed in the previous steps.

Seventh Step: Recognition

Following these efforts, we urge the international community to aim for full recognition of the de facto government **TO INCLUDE AN EXCHANGE OF AMBASSADORS**. In particular, we appeal to the P5 Security Council member states to take the initiative and exchange ambassadors with Afghanistan. We hope that the remaining countries will follow suit, and allow for more levelled engagement with Afghanistan in future interactions.

It is vital for key global actors to continue their active engagement with Afghanistan, as isolation and neglect will only worsen the conditions. With our recommendations, we appeal for proactive dialogue within and beyond Afghanistan to enable effective negotiations and solutions, and to improve conditions for the de facto government and the society of Afghanistan.