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## **31st Special Session of the Human Rights Council The serious human rights concerns and situation in Afghanistan**

### **Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**

24 August 2021

Madam President,  
Excellencies,  
Colleagues and friends,

At this critical moment, the people of Afghanistan look to the Human Rights Council to defend and protect their rights. The need to prevent the commission of human rights abuses of even greater magnitude and scope make this an essential meeting.

The rapid seizure of much of the country, including the capital, by the Taliban has raised grave fears of a return to past patterns of human rights violations, and stoked desperation among many Afghans.

In recent weeks, my Office has received harrowing and credible reports of the impact on civilians of violations of international humanitarian law, as well as violations and abuses of human rights, by the parties to the conflict.

UNAMA's [Protection of Civilians](#) report from 1 January to 30 June this year already indicated an increase in civilian casualties of nearly 50 percent compared to the same period in 2020. Unquestionably, that toll further increased over the months of July and August.

In particular, we have also received credible reports of serious violations of international humanitarian law, and human rights abuses, taking place in many areas under effective Taliban control. They include, among others, summary executions of civilians and *hors de combat* members of the Afghan national security forces; restrictions on the rights of women – including their right to move around freely and girls' right to attend schools; recruitment of child soldiers; and repression of peaceful protest and expression of dissent.

Many people now fear reprisals by the Taliban against those working with the Government or the international community; people who have worked to advance human rights and justice; or those whose lifestyles and opinions are simply perceived to be opposed to the Taliban ideology.

There are grave fears for women, for journalists and for the new generation of civil society leaders who have emerged in the past years. Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and religious minorities are also at risk of violence and repression, given previous patterns of serious violations under Taliban rule and reports of killings and targeted attacks in recent months.

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The harrowing humanitarian situation – aggravated by sustained drought, the COVID-19 pandemic, and significant shortfalls in enabling economic, social and cultural rights – has further deepened with recent events.

A month ago SRSR Deborah Lyons indicated that 18 million Afghans were facing a dire humanitarian situation. This was double the number in July 2020, amounting to one half the people in the country – and it is set to increase.

UNHCR has [estimated](#) that an additional 270,000 people have been forced to leave their homes and livelihoods since January 2021, bringing the total displaced population to more than 3.5 million. We can expect that significant numbers of people will seek refuge in neighbouring countries or outside the region.

The United Nations is committed to stay and deliver aid to those in greatest need, to support efforts to restore peace and stability and to promote the rights and dignity of all Afghans. With fundamental human rights in the balance, my Office will be working urgently to reinstate arrangements for monitoring human rights violations.

Madam President,

In statements over the recent weeks, the Taliban has pledged to respect and protect human rights.

Taliban spokespeople have made specific commitments to respect women's right to work and girls' right to attend school, within the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law. They have also said they would respect the rights of members of ethnic and religious minorities, and refrain from reprisals against those who have worked with the Government or the international community.

The onus is now fully on the Taliban to translate these commitments into reality. In seizing effective control of much of the country, they must ensure, in those areas, ongoing respect for the international human rights commitments made by the State – as well as ensuring ongoing, and indeed heightened, provision of essential public services, without discrimination, to all.

International human rights law is immutable. Enjoyment of human rights is not subject to changes in control of territory or *de facto* authority.

Moreover, significant advances in human rights over the past two decades have given the people of Afghanistan a strong stake in a society that values and defends human rights.

Civil society organisations have flourished across the country. Women have assumed public roles and leadership positions in the media and across society. In 2021, 27 percent of members of parliament and one fifth of civil servants were women. Some 3.5 million girls were attending schools – compared to 1999, when no girls could attend secondary school and only 9,000 were enrolled in primary education.

Human rights defenders have contributed to the economic, political and social development of their communities across the country. A courageous and independent national human rights institution has played a front line role. A plurality of voices has been reflected in a flourishing and diverse media. Youth movements across the country have empowered young women and men from diverse ethnic and religious communities. A generation of young people has grown up with hope for a better future, and the knowledge of free, individual choice, while also being deeply attached to Afghanistan's cultural and religious traditions.

These significant advances in human rights have altered mindsets and changed realities. They will not easily be erased.

They are also essential to Afghanistan's future trajectory. For the development and prosperity of any country to be sustainable, people need to live without fear, without discrimination, without repression and with full respect of their human rights.

Moreover, human rights violations undermine the legitimacy of the perpetrators – both vis à vis the people, and also with respect to regional and international institutions and other States.

I strongly urge the Taliban to adopt norms of responsive governance and human rights, and to work to re-establish social cohesion and reconciliation – including through respect for the rights of all who have suffered during the decades of conflict.

A fundamental red line will be the Taliban's treatment of women and girls, and respect for their rights to liberty, freedom of movement, education, self expression and employment, guided by international human rights norms. In particular, ensuring access to quality secondary education for girls will be an essential indicator of commitment to human rights.

Government must remain inclusive – with meaningful participation of women, and representation of Afghanistan's diverse communities – to help in beginning to build confidence, and ensure a future in which all have an equal stake.

There should be genuine, inclusive dialogue, including women, and including members of Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and religious communities, in order to address the underlying problems that the country faces, the root causes of discrimination, and the enduring legacies of decades of conflict.

There should be no reprisals and no sanctions against the thousands of human rights defenders who have contributed to their people's well-being and rights. The mandate, operations and independence of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission should be respected.

I also urge open access for humanitarian assistance, and the protection of all humanitarian personnel.

Madam President,

I call on all States to create safe pathways for Afghan refugees and migrants, broaden asylum and resettlement programs and immediately halt the deportation of Afghans who seek protection. Neighbouring countries will need additional financial and logistical resources to assist refugees – and all States must be mindful of their obligation to give protection and assistance to those fleeing danger.

I also ask States to use their influence with the Taliban to encourage respect for all human rights, for all. Islamic-majority countries in particular could share their successful experiences of implementing international human rights norms in their cultural and religious contexts.

I urge this Council to take bold and vigorous action, commensurate with the gravity of this crisis, by establishing a dedicated mechanism to closely monitor the evolving human rights situation in Afghanistan, including – in particular – the Taliban's implementation of its promises, with a focus on prevention.

I further note that given the urgency of this situation, an update by my Office at the coming September session may be necessary. I am also willing to update the Council intersessionally, on an urgent basis, in the coming months.

United and unequivocal action by Member States will be an important signal to the Taliban that a return to past practices will not find acceptance in the international community – neither now, nor in the future. The Afghan people have come too far for such an outcome to ever be tolerable.

Thank you, Madam President.

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