

**Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ad Interim, Mr. Ramesh Rajasingham**

**Remarks for the Virtual Briefing on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan**

*New York, 2 February 2021*

*As delivered*

Opening remarks

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am Ramesh Rajasingham, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ad Interim.

It is my huge pleasure to welcome you all to this virtual briefing on the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

Before we begin, because we are doing this virtually, just a few points of housekeeping. Please keep your microphone muted unless you are speaking because we don't have the ability to control that. And if you have not done so yet, kindly ensure that your name and country or organization are reflected in the virtual platform so that it will be easier to give you the floor later in the event. Colleagues and all on this call, please also note this is an open briefing as we normally do, simultaneously being broadcast on UN Web TV and available to the general public as well.

I am also really pleased to have such a wonderful, distinguished panel. Now allow me to introduce our speakers who are joining us today from New York, Geneva and Kabul:

- Her Excellency, Mrs. Adela Raz, Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the United Nations;
- Mr. Raouf Mazou, United Nations Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees; and
- Mr. Ramiz Alakbarov, the United Nations Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in Afghanistan.

They will share their reflections on the humanitarian situation and perspectives on the way ahead.

Before I hand over the floor, allow me to make some brief introductory remarks from OCHA's perspective.

We meet today as Afghanistan slides deeper into crisis. You will have obviously read the news recently of increasing violence there.

Forty years of war and displacement, mixed with climate shocks and now COVID-19, have left almost half the population needing emergency aid.

The number of people in need has doubled from 9.4 million at the start of 2020 to 18.4 million in 2021 – out of a population of 40.4 million. Four in 10 people are now going hungry which means that almost 17 million people are in crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity through March 2021, when the lean period begins. And almost half of all children will be acutely malnourished this year. These are astonishing figures. Few other places in this world have seen suffering soar so quickly in recent times.

In December, I had the opportunity to visit Afghanistan for a week to draw attention to the massive and widespread increase in humanitarian needs.

While in Dand District, Kandahar province, I spoke to newly displaced people in Southern Afghanistan who were among the tens of thousands of people forced to flee conflict in 2020. These were farmers who previously were able to support themselves and their families, who fled from the violence and left behind their homes, land and livelihoods. Now they are internally displaced and living in tents on the slippery side of a mountain with relief assistance as their only support.

Similarly, years of crisis have displaced almost 5 million people since 2012. These people – families, communities, mothers, fathers, children – are forced to eke out a marginal existence in informal settlements without adequate infrastructure, including proper sanitation and safe water supply, on the fringes of cities.

Violence in Afghanistan is countrywide. In February 2020, UNAMA reported that Afghanistan passed a grim milestone with over 100,000 civilians killed or injured since 2010. The targeting of civilians, targeted assassinations and indiscriminate attacks resulting in high numbers of civilian casualties, still continue at an alarming rate.

The conflict also impacts access to vital services. Despite the increased health needs due to COVID-19, health facilities and workers continue to suffer harm from attacks, and acts of intimidation by parties to the conflict. Targeted attacks on schools and educational facilities also demand a renewed commitment by all parties to the conflict to uphold international humanitarian law and adopt measures to safeguard learning spaces for the next generation. We have seen so much progress over the last few years, we simply cannot afford to have any reversal in that, especially in education for girls.

Everywhere I went during my visit, people had had a very simple message: we want peace and we want security. The people desperately hope that the intra-Afghan negotiations result in a credible peace that is inclusive of all people, especially women and girls.

Afghanistan continues to be one of the most difficult operating environments for aid workers. In 2020, 23 aid workers were killed, 53 injured and 111 abducted. This is a solemn reminder of the perils of working in Afghanistan. Humanitarian organizations are guided by the universally recognized principles of neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence. It is unacceptable that aid workers who are trying to help sustain people's lives are killed and maimed with impunity.

Despite these challenges, humanitarian operations remain robust. By the end of September 2020, assistance had been provided to least 8 million people in every district of the country – a huge achievement given the circumstances.

To Member States and partners, thank you for your generous donations towards the response in Afghanistan, some \$555 million; and thank you to those who have contributed to the Central Emergency Response Fund and the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, which together provided \$104 million to aid operations in 2020.

The need for timely funding at existing or higher levels is required to ensure continued humanitarian operations. Almost 16 million people require assistance for which we need \$1.3 billion. To date, we have received \$38 million.

Ultimately of course, Afghanistan's real hope for a safe, secure, sustainable future lies in a life free of conflict which can only be obtained through a successful peace negotiations process.

Until that day becomes a reality, we must do all we can to provide a lifeline of support to the people of Afghanistan.

#### Closing remarks

I want to highlight that the capacity to deliver in Afghanistan is extraordinary. We have access to almost all the regions and locations in Afghanistan. There is great capacity among the international NGOs; and it is the NGOs who carry a lot of the burden and the risk of delivering among the UN agencies.

While all the plans are in place, unless there is sourcing, it is very difficult to implement them, as you can well understand. With the contribution of \$40 million so far, for a \$1.3 billion plan, you will understand that it is very difficult to address the food security issues from our perspective unless there is support for that.

In conclusion, despite Afghanistan being one of the most dangerous countries in the world for humanitarians to operate in, I find the dedication and cooperation of the UN colleagues and NGOs to be exemplary. NGOs, in particular, carry the burden of the risk, as I just mentioned - providing assistance to the most vulnerable people in the deep field. They are a critical partner to the United Nations and a lifeline to Afghans in need. We are hugely appreciative of the remark of the Permanent Representative, Ambassador Raz, to find a better way to facilitate their work.

We heard today about some of the efforts undertaken by the Government. I commend these efforts, and thank you, Ambassador Raz, for the partnership that your colleagues on the ground provide to us and that they provide to us here. I wish to again reiterate our support as we all agree that more needs to be done for the civilians affected by this conflict.

The Afghan population have extraordinary courage and resilience. However, for no one on earth should survival be the only option. They have been through numerous conflicts for generations. We have to do all we can to give them the normal life that we all take for granted. They just need peace and security and they can help rebuild their country as well. I wish to conclude by appealing to donors for their support to the 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan and the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund. Your generosity can go a long way to save lives, and has saved thousands of lives, and alleviate the suffering of the people of Afghanistan. Similarly, your generosity in the past has alleviated the suffering of millions of people. Together, we can do more. And together, we must do more.

Thank you very much, Excellencies, for participating in this meeting, for all your generous support and also for giving us this extra time to conclude by giving the speakers time to respond to your comments.

Thank you very much, again.