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Security Council Update II: The Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan

Introduction

In 2021, the United States (US) of America announced a complete withdrawal of military troops and evacuation of diplomatic personnel in Afghanistan, ending a two decade-long war in the landlocked Member State. This withdrawal was done under a short and rapid timeline, with the US President Joe Biden announcing the plans in April 2021, and accomplished a full 95 percent withdrawal only three months later in July.¹ This mass military exodus left US-allied Member States' troops with limited protection as they forged their own plans, and each Member State also departed from Afghanistan along the same timeline in order to best ensure the safety of those they evacuated.² The resulting power vacuum led to a quick takeover by the opposition, the Taliban, and by the time the last US airplane had left Afghanistan, the Central Asian Member State was already besieged and under Taliban control.³ The Afghan President and the rest of the executive branch were forced to flee to neighboring Member States. The Taliban became the de facto Afghan government despite condemnation and an initial withholding of recognition as such by most western Member States and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).⁴

Overwhelming Poverty and Famine

Now living under a de facto Taliban government, Afghan civilians who were unable to leave are now facing an economic collapse leaving extreme food and employment insecurity in its wake.⁵ The poverty rate in Afghanistan currently stands around 72 percent, but the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated that roughly 97 percent of the Afghan population will fall into extreme poverty by mid-2022.⁶ This will leave the Member State in nearly universal malnutrition and acute food insecurity, leading it to be considered the number one humanitarian crisis in the world by the International Rescue Committee and the crisis most in need of an immediate international response by the World Food Programme (WFP), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other humanitarian aid and human rights organizations.^{7,8}

With little to no real government infrastructure or funds, most Afghan teachers, medical personnel, and the public service labor force have gone without pay since at least October 2021.⁹ The United States has frozen USD 10 Billion

¹ "Global Conflict Tracker: War in Afghanistan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified January 3, 2022, accessed January 12, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>

² "NATO and Afghanistan," North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), last modified December 7, 2021, accessed January 12, 2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm

³ "Global Conflict Tracker: War in Afghanistan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified January 3, 2022, accessed January 12, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>

⁴ Ayesha Tanzeem and Ayaz Gul, "Ghani Leaves Afghanistan as Taliban Enter Kabul, Set to Take Control," *Voice of America (VOA)*, August 15, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_ghani-leaves-afghanistan-taliban-enter-kabul-set-take-control/6209601.html

⁵ "97 percent of Afghans could plunge into poverty by mid 2022, says UNDP," *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, September 9, 2021, accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/97-percent-afghans-could-plunge-poverty-mid-2022-says-undp>

⁶ "97 percent of Afghans could plunge into poverty by mid 2022, says UNDP," *UNDP*.

⁷ "Watchlist 2022: The top 10 crises the world can't ignore in 2022," International Rescue Committee (IRC), last modified January 7, 2022, accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.rescue.org/article/top-10-crises-world-cant-ignore-2022>

⁸ "Afghanistan: Government collapse marked by 'repeated war crimes and relentless bloodshed' – new report," *Amnesty International*, December 15, 2021, accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/afghanistan-government-collapse-marked-by-repeated-war-crimes-and-relentless-bloodshed-new-report/>

⁹ Secunder Kermani, "On the front line as Afghan children battle malnutrition and measles," *BBC News*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59637586>

in foreign reserves that had previously belonged to the Afghan government, and the rest of foreign aid committed to Afghanistan have been withheld by investors in the fear of helping the Taliban while or instead of helping Afghan civilians. As this aid continues to be tied up in diplomatic and ideological bureaucracy, 90 percent of Afghanistan's health clinics are expected to shut down, exacerbating the millions of people suffering from malnutrition and starvation, COVID-19, and other illnesses.¹⁰

Human Rights Violations Against Women

After the Taliban takeover, severe restrictions on women's rights - amounting to human rights violations, according to Human Rights Watch - have been imposed across the Member State.¹¹ Having lived under a Taliban government before, many women in highly skilled positions across the Member State, such as those in government positions, in higher education, and in the medical field, have fled to neighboring Member States or to family in other parts of the world.^{12, 13} Most feared not only that if they stayed they would be forced to quit their job, but also they would be punished and/or discriminated against more heavily for their prior positions in jobs that would now be off-limits to women.¹⁴ As the Taliban solidifies control, this has primarily been the case.¹⁵ The Taliban have announced that women can return to certain occupations only, and must do so in head coverings, preferably a burqa, and must be accompanied by a male guardian.¹⁶ If the Taliban retains control, fewer and fewer women will be able to join the workforce due to lack of education and heavier familial duties. Women are now barred from attending school after age 12 and are encouraged to marry and start families shortly after they are no longer allowed to attend school.¹⁷ No longer allowed to attend school or gain employment, the already tenuous ability to gain financial independence as a woman has been completely eliminated.^{18, 19} Instances of rape and forced marriages are rising, as are reports of women ending their own life to avoid this fate.^{20, 21} Many women have also rebelled, organizing protests and demanding international support for women's rights in Afghanistan.²² While the Taliban initially attempted to quell these protests through non-violent means, as the protests continue the Taliban reaction has become violent, with the Taliban using whips and sticks against protestors, as well as pepper spray and tear gas.^{23, 24}

¹⁰ "Watchlist 2022: Crisis in Afghanistan: Unprecedented hunger after the conflict," *International Rescue Committee (IRC)*, January 7, 2022, accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.rescue.org/article/crisis-afghanistan-unprecedented-hunger-after-conflict>

¹¹ "Afghanistan: Taliban Abuses Cause Widespread Fear," *Human Rights Watch*, September 23, 2021, accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/23/afghanistan-taliban-abuses-cause-widespread-fear>

¹² Zainab Pirzad, Atefa Alizada, and Rubaba Rezai, "Women report Afghanistan: 'I worry my daughters will never know peace': women flee the Taliban - again," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/aug/12/i-worry-my-daughters-will-never-know-peace-women-flee-the-taliban-again-afghanistan>

¹³ Priscilla Alvarez and Jennifer Hansler, "Afghan women report forced marriages to flee country amid Taliban takeover, sources say," *CNN*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/02/politics/afghan-women-trafficking-taliban-escape/index.html>

¹⁴ "Afghanistan: Taliban Abuses Cause Widespread Fear," *Human Rights Watch*, September 23, 2021, accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/23/afghanistan-taliban-abuses-cause-widespread-fear>

¹⁵ "Afghanistan: Taliban Abuses Cause Widespread Fear," *Human Rights Watch*.

¹⁶ "Afghanistan: Taliban Abuses Cause Widespread Fear," *Human Rights Watch*.

¹⁷ "Afghanistan: Taliban Abuses Cause Widespread Fear," *Human Rights Watch*.

¹⁸ "Afghanistan: Taliban Abuses Cause Widespread Fear," *Human Rights Watch*.

¹⁹ "Afghanistan: Taliban Abuses Cause Widespread Fear," *Human Rights Watch*.

²⁰ Zainab Pirzad, Atefa Alizada, and Rubaba Rezai, "Women report Afghanistan: 'I worry my daughters will never know peace': women flee the Taliban - again," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/aug/12/i-worry-my-daughters-will-never-know-peace-women-flee-the-taliban-again-afghanistan>

²¹ Eliza Mackintosh, "Taliban decree on women's rights, which made no mention of school or work, dismissed by Afghan women and experts," *CNN*, December 4, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/03/asia/afghanistan-taliban-decree-womens-rights-intl/index.html>

²² "Afghanistan: Women call on the international community to support women's rights amid ongoing Taliban suppression," *Amnesty International*, November 25, 2021, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/11/afghanistan-women-call-on-the-international-community-to-support-womens-rights-amid-ongoing-taliban-suppression/>

²³ Masoud Popalzai, Laura Smith-Spark and Tim Lister, "Taliban fighters use whips against Afghan women protesting the all-male interim government," *CNN*, September 9, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/08/asia/afghanistan-women-taliban-government-intl/index.html>

²⁴ "Taliban response to protests increasingly violent, warns OHCHR," *UN News*, September 10, 2021, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099552>

Recent Developments and Conclusion

On January 11, 2022, the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) published the *2022 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan*. While this plan aims to reach 24.4 million Afghans in life-threatening circumstances, the USD 4.44 Billion has not yet been acquired in full, leaving OCHA and the UN with a far-reaching plan it cannot actuate in its entirety.²⁵ In December 2019, the Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution to improve aid for Afghans while preventing such vital funds from the Taliban.²⁶ S/RES/2615's provisions enabled the process and payment of finances and other economic resources, but such funds should not be received by individuals or entities found in S/RES/1988's sanctions list.²⁷ UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the UN Security Council in late January that the international community, including the Security Council, needs to provide resources, progress, and prevent Afghanistan from "spiraling" further and that the Member State is "hanging by a thread."²⁸ Guterres also called for the Taliban to expand opportunity and security, uphold human rights, and present actual commitment towards the global community for the Afghan population.²⁹

A 5.3 magnitude earthquake in Badghis Province, Afghanistan, on January 17, 2022, has only exacerbated matters and increased humanitarian needs.³⁰ The US has continued to suspend infrastructure projects and any other developmental aid to Afghanistan. Projects, in part funded by the US through a number of international organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, have also been halted.³¹ As the international community begins to switch focus on unrest and conflict in eastern Europe, the risk of starvation, untreated medical needs, and further economic collapse only increases in Afghanistan.

²⁵ United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. *Humanitarian Response Plan: Afghanistan*, January 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-response-plan-2022-january-2022>

²⁶ "Security Council paves way for aid to reach desperate Afghans," United Nations, December 22, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/12/1108642>

²⁷ "Security Council paves way for aid to reach desperate Afghans," United Nations.

²⁸ "'We cannot abandon the people of Afghanistan' Guterres tells Security Council," United Nations, January 26, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110622>

²⁹ "'We cannot abandon the people of Afghanistan' Guterres tells Security Council," United Nations.

³⁰ "Earthquake in Badghis Province, Afghanistan – Flash Update No. 2," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, January 21, 2022, Accessed February 20, 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/earthquake-badghis-province-afghanistan-flash-update-no-2-21-january-2022-1200>

³¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Reshaping U.S. Aid to Afghanistan: The Challenge of Lasting Progress," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reshaping-us-aid-afghanistan-challenge-lasting-progress>