

# “Prospect for Building Sustainable Peace in Afghanistan: Critical Analysis”

Presented by: Ms. Lisa REEFKE, Senior Political Affairs Officer  
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Afghanistan has remained in a state of conflict for decades, resulting in high numbers of conflict-related civilian casualties. As the timeframe, participation and content of intra-Afghan peace negotiations are to be determined, concerns remain about prospects for building sustainable peace in Afghanistan. In this context, the GPAJ was fortunate to host Ms. Lisa Reefke, Senior Political Affairs Officer with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) since February 2019, as she delivered a talk which combined both - an objective analysis of the current situation, and recommendations and observations for sustainable peacebuilding approaches in Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>.

Ms. Reefke’s presentation focused on six areas:

- 1) Current political developments and trends
- 2) Security dynamics
- 3) Human rights situation specially in context of protection of civilians
- 4) Socio-economic and the humanitarian situation
- 5) Role of UNAMA and the UN family in Afghanistan
- 6) Personal reflections and outlook

The presentation began with a discussion about the challenges posed by parallel peace and electoral processes in Afghanistan and related political uncertainties.

In terms of the security dynamics, fighting continued between pro-government forces and the Taliban in a contest for territorial control, in addition to fighting and incidents attributed by other anti-government elements including the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant - Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). Cumulatively, this means that there has been increasing volatility of the security environment and a military stalemate, with consistent impact on civilian lives and objects.

To better understand the exact impact of violence, Ms. Reefke then presented details about the situation of human rights and protection of civilians in Afghanistan. Between 2009 and 2019, civilian casualties - including both killed and injured - surpassed 100,000. This number predictably, and sadly, includes a disproportionate number of women and children. In July-September 2019, civilian casualties doubled as compared to the period of April-June 2019 and saw a 42% increase as compared to the same quarter in 2018. Data collected by UNAMA in 2018 showed that around a quarter of the civilian casualties could be attributed to pro-Government forces, and 63% to anti-government elements. All sides need to scale down the fighting and uphold human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

The discussion then moved onto the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. Afghans living below the poverty line increased from 39% in 2012 to a current rate of 55%, the economy is currently growing at a rate of 2%, as compared to a population growth rate of 2.3% per year. In 2020, some 9.4 million people totalling around a quarter of the population, will need humanitarian assistance - a 50% increase as compared to 2019 numbers. Cost estimates by the World Bank for a potential political settlement in Afghanistan and overall medium-term financing needs until 2024, indicate grant needs between US\$5.8 billion and US\$7.6 billion per year. This cost estimate led to a clearer understanding of how much the international community's sustained support would be crucial to support implementation of a future intra-Afghan political settlement.

Finally, the briefing introduced the role of UNAMA and the UN family in Afghanistan. Initially established in 2002, UNAMA's mandate was extended in 2019 by the Security Council Resolution 2489 and focuses on political good offices, support to peace and reconciliation processes, monitoring and promoting human rights and the protection of civilians in armed conflict, good governance and regional cooperation. It engages with UN agencies, funds and programs to provide a "delivering as one" approach, technical guidance and inputs to strengthen the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus in Afghanistan.

The last segment of the presentation and perhaps the most scintillating was Ms. Reefke's analysis of the situation, and some reflections on the way ahead. Ms. Reefke said that national and international consensus on Afghan-led/-owned peace processes would go a long way. This would also include a clearly defined role of any external partners, including regional actors and frameworks, in the implementation of a future peace agreement. Given the current situation, long-term and unwavering international and national commitment is needed to improve the interrelated security, governance, human rights and development challenges. Finally, questions of political legitimacy must be considered in the context of a future intra-Afghan peace process.

Ms. Reefke concluded her presentation with a look into the applicability of the theory of "hybrid" peacebuilding approaches in Afghanistan. She acknowledged that the result of liberal peacebuilding interventions - aligned with the norms practiced in the Western-liberal world - have yielded fairly few successes. In comparison, advocates of hybrid peacebuilding argue that such an approach accommodates both the liberal and the "local" (i.e. taking into consideration the local historical, cultural, and societal context, including existing local non-state structures, and thereby prioritising grassroot interests rather than the interests of the ruling elite, and leading to more sustainable and real peace). However, while the theory is promising, there are questions that must be answered prior to applying the theory to Afghanistan peace processes.

- Could a hybrid peace approach effectively maintain peace and security, ensuring that non-state customary structures (e.g., local authorities, tribal elders) would be able to overcome prevailing violence and maintain order?
- Could traditional forms of conflict resolution and transformation (e.g., through religious leaders, local shuras/courts) be given space in established state structures?
- Would the promotion of Afghanistan's regions lead to economic development and address the needs of the local population?

- Would traditional approaches be able to uphold and advance institutional gains in human rights - especially women's rights, rule of law, democratic representation (including of youth, minorities)?

Thus, Ms. Reefke offered the participating 15 scholars and practitioners from GPAJ a complete overview and holistic analysis of the situation in Afghanistan. In a short presentation, she managed to show the complexity of the situation, identified current approaches being taken, highlighted their limitations and benefits, and offered reflections on ways to address prevailing conflict dynamics and foster peace efforts. Ms. Reefke's presentation was then followed by an equally invigorating and mind-opening series of questions and answers, which is briefly documented below.