

Ladies and Gentlemen.

For advocates of the empowerment and protection of women in Afghanistan, these are heady times. The recent years have seen a growing national awareness not only of the personal costs to women for our failure to protect them in the context of armed conflict, but also of the tremendous collective costs we pay as a Government for failing to achieve our goals of building peace, pursuing development, and reconstructing post-conflict communities. It is tragic that it has taken graphic images of women raped and young girls with acid thrown in their faces in Afghanistan for daring to return to school to shame our collective conscience, but Afghanistan with Support of NATO countries is responding.

Women's empowerment is inextricably linked to security, economic opportunity, effective governance, and social development. The Afghan Government and people are working toward a vision: of a country where citizens are free from violence and coercion; where girls can go to school; where parents can find jobs and quality health care is more easily accessible. These will be the greatest barometers of Afghanistan's progress. Afghan Government plans to support women's initiatives, outlined in the Women's Action Plan for Afghanistan.

The murder of women leaders and human rights defenders in Afghanistan and the failure of the government to identify and prosecute their assailants underline the impression of a lack of national commitment to women's rights. Not only has the Afghan administration failed to publicly articulate a vision of women's rights that is both home-grown and consistent with traditional Afghan Islamic society, but it has believed by Women rights activists, Government treated women's rights as a bargaining chip to win support from traditional leaders.

We continue to urge the Afghan government to protect women leaders, and to take seriously the everyday threats against women and girls by extremists who try to discourage school attendance by destroying schools or throwing acid on young schoolgirls. We support and admire the bravery and determination of Afghan families and the Afghan girls who insist their access to education in the face of such threats. Our programs provide greater protection to girls' schools and health facilities, for example by building protective walls when requested.

The advancement of women's rights is critical to political and economic progress everywhere around the world. This is especially true in Afghanistan, where women's human rights have been ignored, attacked and eroded over decades, especially under Taliban rule.

Given the Taliban's abhorrent record on women's rights during its reign, it is stunning that that the insurgents are scoring some debate points by arguing that women in Afghanistan today suffer more broadly from the lack of security, corruption, rights abuses and civilian casualties. Indeed, advances in political participation by women and school attendance by girls have been offset by a failure to insist on accountability for warlords whose forces committed sexual violence during the years of conflict and continue such abuse today. Instead, a number of these criminals have been given positions of power.

UN Resolution 1325 called for greater representation of women in national decision making, especially in prevention and resolution of conflict; incorporation of a gender perspective into peacekeeping

operations; new financial and logistical support for gender dimensions of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction; greater consideration of women and girls in resettlement, rehabilitation, and demobilization programs; respect for women's human rights and an end to impunity for crimes against women; new efforts to combat sexual violence in armed conflict; and greater consultations with local and international women's groups.

Afghanistan has taken initial steps of ensuring women rights not treated as bargaining chip to win support from Traditional Leaders.

However, We strongly believe that gender can make a difference to security in operations and We can no longer afford to exclude the talents and insights of half the population in the pursuit of peace or to treat them as mere victims. Four Specific actions should be prioritized.

First, those charged with leading and supporting peace processes, especially mediators from the UN and regional bodies, should commit to bring women to the table as peace negotiations are conducted and peace agreements are implemented. In Afghanistan, talented women peace builders face discrimination in legal, cultural and traditional practices, and threats of violence make even the most courageous women think twice before stepping forward. The usual rejoinder is that there simply are not women capable of participating in these processes due to the male domination of security and conflict resolution issues. And yet in many of the affected regions, it is women who serve as the mediators of disputes at the community levels; in others, educated and successful women are active in sectors involving similar negotiations, including government, business, law, and academics.

Second, bilateral contributors and multilateral institutions should insist that post-conflict recovery packages prioritize issues of importance to women, in particular reproductive health care and girls' education. It has been said: "Educate a boy and you help a person; educate a girl and you help a community."

Donors should also help women to attain economic independence through land ownership, micro-enterprise and skills training. Afghanistan conflict recovery plans should be subjected to gender-impact analysis and specify the funds dedicated to women's needs. At the same time, gender considerations must be mainstreamed, such that the health minister views reproductive health care as a top priority, the commerce minister promotes women's engagement in all levels of business activity, the education minister stresses girls' education from primary to tertiary levels, and so on. Women's issues are too important to be left to the women's ministry alone.

Third, EU, US, NATO in particular must extend generous contributions and political support needed for Ministry of Women's Affairs to be a forceful and ever-present advocate throughout Afghanistan.

Fourth, bilateral donors and multilateral institutions should expand assistance for private women's groups in Afghanistan. Civil society organizations are often the first victims of the polarization that accompanies internal armed conflicts. Women must have the institutional strength to influence local and national decisions that impact their lives.

Best

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