



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Friday 18 September 2020

11 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Blackstone; Lord Grocott; Baroness Fall; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Mendelsohn; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 2

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 9 - 17

Witness

I: Deborah Lyons, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Deborah Lyons.

Q9 **The Chair:** I welcome our next witness, Deborah Lyons. May I thank you very much indeed for your understanding today. We are starting late and you still have your diary commitments, so I appreciate that we must finish at 12 noon regardless. I say that not for you, but for my colleagues, so they know we must be brief. I will follow the same ruling myself. I will go through the business quickly.

I have to remind Members and witnesses that the session is on the record, transcribed and broadcast. I remind my colleagues on the Committee that we must declare any interests when asking our questions. I shall start with a general one and turn to my colleagues for more detailed questions.

I explained earlier that Deborah Lyons is Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

What is the outlook for the negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban? What result would you anticipate? What would be the necessary components of a stable, durable government?

Deborah Lyons: Thank you very much, Baroness. I have asked my staff to try to push back my diary so that we can spend more time, but I recognise that many important members of your group have other commitments, so let us please try to get through the wonderful set of questions I know you have for me. I was able to listen to some of the earlier discussion—not all of it unfortunately—and it was very rich.

I have to start by saying a huge thank you to you and your colleagues for this opportunity. It is truly admirable that you are looking at this issue with such intensity and such clear commitment and concern for Afghanistan. I think it is yet another example of the UK's interest and continued partnership with us—

The Chair: I seem to have lost you. You have frozen.

Deborah Lyons: —to predict how the negotiations will go. The talks began last Saturday, so we are not yet at a full week, but there are positive signs. Both parties have said that they are approaching, and will continue to approach, the talks with constructive attitudes, and, frankly, I must tell you, as I follow closely what is happening in Doha, that the first week appears to be playing out well in the rooms.

There are difficult issues to solve, as we all know, including the system of government: will it be a republic or an emirate, or any of the variations in between? There are associated questions: rights under the constitution under Islamic law; how to integrate the large fighting forces on each side; how to address grievances of crimes and violent actions during the many years of conflict; how to deal with that thorny but absolutely fundamental issue in any peace negotiations of a victim-centred rights

discussion; how to bring the societies together; and how to evolve into a modern style of governance and economic management. Let us also acknowledge, of course, the issue of how to reduce narcotics production and the terrible impact of the drug industry. There are these and many more.

For these issues to be resolved, and the violence to end, somehow both sides have to scope out a sharing of governance in which their supporters and they can feel that they belong, and that their concerns are being heard. There is a range of options for how this can happen, and that is what the two sides have sat down to do. I would not expect a result to come quickly, nor should we expect a result to come quickly, if they are indeed to go into the necessary details to cover all these topics and truly air their differences.

A substantive, durable agreement will not be easy to draft. History has shown us that these kinds of agreements and talks take months, even years, to finalise. We cannot be rushing the end. There are a lot of weapons in Afghanistan and a lot of potential spoilers. It will be important that as many of these interest groups as possible have their wishes satisfied to a reasonable extent, so that buy-in happens with any final agreement. As the UN, and I am sure the UK shares this, we are particularly concerned that human rights—women's rights, ethnic rights and minority rights—are well respected in any final agreement.

Afghanistan will continue to need help from international support and aid for a long time to come, purely on humanitarian grounds and, most certainly, to allow the essential development efforts that have begun but must be maintained if peace is to take hold. I hope that peace will bring the security necessary for businesses and government-backed projects to prosper and to provide the jobs and economic opportunities that are so needed. Let us be clear: a good solid durable peace agreement in Afghanistan will bring greater prosperity and peace to the whole region. We must allow the parties the time that they need to get an agreement that can bring about a peace that will counter four decades of conflict. Thank you so much for the question.

The Chair: Thank you for setting the scene so clearly.

Q10 **Lord Grocott:** Thank you very much for that introduction. I noticed in your very interesting briefing to the Security Council on the peace process that you said: "Regional co-operation will be a vital element in the peace process—the neighbourhood—both as a contributor to and a beneficiary of peace".

My question is slightly broader, but to the same end: which countries are playing a role in facilitating and contributing to the peace process? Are other countries significant to the achievement of a settlement? What can be done to secure their constructive engagement?

Deborah Lyons: Clearly, peace will come to Afghanistan because the Afghans want it and will work hard to make it happen, but it will also come because of the support that is needed from the neighbourhood,

from the regional countries and from the international community. Let us begin.

Clearly, we would not be where we are now were it not for the 29 February agreement between the US and the Taliban that paved the way for these talks. In that respect, the United States, and most particularly its special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, has played a key role, which we all recognise.

I also want to highlight the exceptional efforts of Qatar, not just in hosting the US-Taliban negotiations but in truly encouraging the peace talks to start and hosting the first round of the Afghan negotiations, now referred to, as I said, as the Afghanistan peace process. They have changed the name from inter-Afghan negotiations to the Afghanistan peace process.

The government of Afghanistan have already made incredible compromises, particularly in the area of releasing prisoners. This was a huge challenge, but it was done to build confidence and to get to the peace table.

It is also our view that Pakistan played an important role in bringing the two sides together.

Iran, as well, has encouraged the agreement between President Ghani and Dr Abdullah to ensure a united national government and to support the start of the talks.

As you know, the United Kingdom has played an incredible role all along, particularly in working with Pakistan and others, and with the Afghan government, to help support them at the highest level. This has been a very significant contributing factor.

Russia and China have actively supported the talks and have hosted the Taliban delegations in their capitals. These countries are not alone. Other neighbours—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—and near neighbours such as India and Turkey, have all made valuable contributions to bringing the peace talks to fruition and to the development of the country.

Indonesia has played a critical role on women's rights, working with Afghan officials and women's groups and the important ulema councils.

Undoubtedly, though, the continued support of the neighbours and new neighbours will be essential to a successful process and future development in the region.

The neighbourhood and the larger region also stand to benefit significantly from a peaceful Afghanistan, as you pointed out and as I said in my remarks to the UN Security Council. This support and this coming together of the region will help to remove the connected curses of terrorism and drugs, both from Afghanistan and from the countries in the

region, and will contribute significantly to a better economy through trade connectivity across the region.

For this reason, as you noted, we in the UN family are working very closely with the near neighbours, with the border neighbours, to examine a full menu of work opportunities on the cross-border initiative, whether we are talking about people movement, trade transit, drug trafficking, et cetera—ways in which we can substantially and concretely demonstrate that the neighbourhood will benefit from peace in Afghanistan and therefore needs to support the peace. At the same time, this stable landscape in the middle of central and south Asia will bring an incredible degree of stability and prosperity to the region.

There is a huge partnership here. Let us also remember that countries such as the UK, those of the EU, the US, Japan, India, Canada, Australia, South Korea, and institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, and many others, have contributed significant sums to Afghanistan in various forms of aid and development measures.

It is important that this continues so that the country can move forward and, as I said, so that we can ensure that peace is fuelled and financially supported. It is important for building those government institutions, for dealing with the anti-corruption efforts and for continuing to promote the incredible importance of human rights and freedoms for women and minorities in all sectors.

It is important that the Afghan parties understand this, and, at the right time and in the right way, seek to engage all these regional and international supporters in the discussions about Afghanistan.

It is very opportune that, this fall, in parallel with the peace negotiations, we will all be supporting a conference of major donors, the pledging conference in Geneva. It will be co-chaired by Finland, the United Nations and the government of Afghanistan. This is an important moment: an opportunity for a vote of confidence for Afghanistan and the peace process. For our part, of course, as the UN we stand ready to work with all the parties in this process, as you have heard expressed by our Secretary-General at the opening ceremony last Saturday.

I shall conclude by saying that the main answer to this question is that in both words and in actions the international community, both near and far, has been steadfast in its support for the peace talks and Afghanistan overall. We need to continue our strategic patience going forward in parallel with these peace talks to help Afghanistan land at that peace landscape that it so much deserves. Thank you for the question.

- Q11** **Baroness Fall:** Thank you very much for your time this morning. I want to turn to the role of women in Afghanistan in relation both to the peace process and to the future of the country, and to ask you whether you felt that their participation was given enough weight in the peace talks, and whether you had any concerns about whether their rights going forward might be jeopardised in the actual peace process.

Deborah Lyons: I would have to say, as any diplomatic leader, political leader or community leader, that we all need to be concerned about women's participation and women's rights. We are still evolving as a society, both here in Afghanistan and in our own countries. The struggle for women's rights has gone on now for most of my career. We continue to face challenges. It is important for all of us, and certainly has been recognised by the UK, that these peace negotiations, like none before, will be critical in demonstrating not just the commitment of the Afghan government parties but the world's commitment to women's rights.

I want on behalf of the UN to recognise your incredible contribution in so many different fora. Your Permanent Representative in New York established the UN Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan, and the UK chairs that group. I have had the pleasure of addressing this group, and I am impressed by the commitment and leadership. You lead this international group in New York on a critical issue, and one, as I said, that will be foremost in the peace process and will test us all. I am very gratified to have the partnership that we have with your office in New York and for the role it is playing as chair of this group.

On participation directly in the peace talks, it is quite obvious that there are currently not enough women in the two negotiating teams. There are four women in the Islamic Republic team, and as yet—as yet—none in the Taliban team. I commend the excellent work and outreach of the four women in the government's team as well as the women who are playing a role here in Afghanistan in the many Islamic Republic peace structures.

However, there will have to be more discussion with and between the parties about how more women are brought into the process. The international community can help in this regard, but we must continue to emphasise the importance that in 2020 we cannot have a peace process without women in significant numbers.

As for the protection of women's rights, as I was saying, the world will be watching these negotiations. We will measure the performance of the parties on this account, but the world will also measure the performance of us all as the international community.

I emphasise that the protection of women's rights is the responsibility of everyone who attends or supports these negotiations—men and women alike. It is not the sole responsibility of the women candidates on the negotiating team.

Is the fear that women's rights might be sacrificed justified? I certainly hope it is not, but the fear is definitely there. I talk to far too many Afghan women who express the concern that they are being abandoned, or will be abandoned, and we cannot allow that sentiment to be true or real.

As the international community, it is our responsibility to support Afghan women and underline that any outcome of the peace process, and any future Afghan leadership, must ensure the protection of human rights of

all Afghans. Apart from the international community's demands, I would hope that the parties also will see this benefit. To that end, we have active conversations with the Afghan government, and I shall soon be discussing this issue with the political commission of the Taliban. Here in Afghanistan, the diplomatic community, along with many of the Afghan women's groups, and the government of Afghanistan, are working together to highlight this issue.

We have seen from the research that women must be involved in these peace agreements. If they are, you end up with an agreement that is more inclusive and longer lasting. Research done in 2016 of 170 countries concluded that the most critical indicator of the stability of a country was not the level of its prosperity, was not its ethnocultural profile, and was not even its democratic form of government. It was how that country treated and engaged women. If we want a stable Afghanistan, we need the women of Afghanistan involved at all levels. Thank you so much, and thank you in particular for the work that the UK has led on.

Q12 Lord Reid of Cardowan: We all want the talks to succeed, although it will be a long and gruelling road, as you point out, but we have an obligation to ask this: in the unfortunate event of failure of the peace talks, and given the committed drawdown of international troops, and therefore leverage and practical support in Afghanistan from the international security community, what is your estimate of the capability of the Afghan armed forces and police to maintain internal security and stability in the event of the failure of these talks?

Deborah Lyons: Thank you very much for the question. I would say that we focus so much on making the talks work and ensuring that this comes to a positive end that our discussions about "What if?" and the different scenarios—the plan B option and so forth—are still very much evolving. We have seen that the Afghan police have been limited in their ability to function as we might see a normal professional police force function in other countries, because, in fact, they have had to play a role in many of the checkpoints and supporting the security within the conflict, as compared with the normal type of policing that we might all be used to.

What we have also seen with the Afghan military itself and the Afghan defence forces is a strong professionalisation of those forces and a truly enhanced capability.

I was here four years ago as ambassador for Canada for a three-year period, and certainly, having come back now, I must say that in all my discussions with the various interlocutors supporting the Afghan military, people feel a great sense of confidence in the strength of the Afghan army to function as a professional military. The problem is that if the talks were to fall apart, and the confidence of the people of Afghanistan were to collapse, including, potentially, political concerns about what the next chapter would look like, it is very hard to say what security forces would be needed to try to maintain some stability.

Right now, we are seeing an enormously high level of conflict—in fact, way too high, given that the US-Taliban agreement signed at the end of February heralded a period when people were expecting a reduction in violence. Here in Afghanistan, the five weeks leading up to the opening ceremony last Saturday saw the highest number of violent incidents in the past five years, exactly contrary to what we should be seeing.

I think everyone is concerned that the conflict cannot go on. The spirit of the people is being tested. The spirit and the commitment of the international community supporting Afghanistan are being tested. The way all that becomes validated is by a successful peace agreement. That is the direction we have to be headed in.

The Chair: Thank you very much. In the interests of time, although I know Lord Reid has another question that he would like to ask, I am going to keep that back as a supplementary if we have time. I propose to move to our next questioner, Baroness Rawlings, but, as I say, if there is time at the end, I will go back to Lord Reid.

Q13 Baroness Rawlings: Good morning and thank you very much indeed for your clear thoughts.

What are your expectations and hopes for the Afghanistan conference in Geneva on 23 and 24 November 2020? What meetings have you had with the Finnish, who are organising it? I am especially concerned about civil society. As you said, a voice on women's rights is crucial. I declare an interest as patron of the mother and child clinics in the Panjshir valley for over 30 years.

Deborah Lyons: Thank you so much, Baroness. As I mentioned earlier, I think that the timing of this pledging conference, in some ways, presents a bit of a challenge for all of us, but an incredible opportunity. It is an opportunity when the international community and the key donors in particular can make clear for the government of Afghanistan and, frankly, for the Taliban as well—the two parties at the peace talks—in parallel with this conference, that we continue to support Afghanistan, but with certain conditions, and that our expectation is that these conditions are met, be it conditions relating to anti-corruption, be it related to a united government working on behalf of the people of Afghanistan, or be it with regard to the rule of law and the support and engagement of all the members of Afghan society, most particularly human rights.

I have used the fact that this conference is happening at this critical time as an important event to highlight for the Taliban in my discussions with the political commission, and the larger diplomatic community, and in our discussions with the government of Afghanistan, what we consider to be essential for a strong, prosperous and inclusive society. With the incredible leadership we have had from Finland, and the many meetings we have had already on the conference with the Finnish co-chair, the government of Afghanistan and the key donors, we will see that conference happen.

In fact, I can tell you, hot off the press, that we had a meeting this week where it was agreed that the conference will happen in November in Geneva. We have yet to determine—a couple of other meetings will come up in the next few weeks—the timeline of the commitment, and to finalise the Afghan national plan for development and, most importantly, the monitoring and accountability framework.

I assure you that we constantly emphasise in these discussions the conditions for those pledges and what, once the pledges have been made, will be very strict monitoring and accountability, particularly in the area of corruption and human rights. We should take this opportunity and use it as a focal point in that dialogue.

Q14 Lord Hannay of Chiswick: Good morning, ambassador, and thank you for your very useful testimony.

Sticking to the issue of corruption, the most recent UNAMA report spoke about identifying significant institutional gaps in Afghanistan that it stated have stymied progress and undermined confidence. What steps need to be taken now—not waiting for the end of the peace process, which, as you say, could be quite lengthy—to deal with those problems at this stage?

Are we right in thinking, as the perception generally has been, that President Ashraf Ghani and the top leadership in Afghani are distinctly less involved in corrupt practices than his predecessor Hamid Karzai and his family?

Deborah Lyons: Thank you so much for the question. I appreciate the interest of your Committee in our report. Our report on anti-corruption published in July was one of our best ever, and portrayed exactly the situation here and the steps that needed to be taken.

I also want to highlight for you, which you may or may not know, the fact that your own UK embassy here in Kabul co-chairs an ambassadorial committee on anti-corruption. That team of ambassadors, led by the UK ambassador and the EU ambassador, has been a driving force in working with the Afghan government to ensure that more steps are taken to address the too-high level of corruption that exists.

We all know that corruption is bad in and of itself because it removes money that should be directed to services for the Afghan people and is obviously very destructive. There is also what it does to the confidence of the people. We need to demonstrate that real action is being taken by the government and that the international community—the donors—is focusing on this to build the confidence of the Afghans that they truly have a responsive government.

I referred to corruption as the silent terrorist because it destroys internally in a way that is devastating. This has been a top issue for us as the UN. It is a top issue for the many diplomatic entities working here with the Afghan government. As you will notice, the report highlights the need for an anti-corruption commission to be established and for the

Afghan government to ensure that they renew the anti-corruption strategy that had been put in place in 2017.

Both those demands have been put forward by your ambassador and the EU ambassador representing the international community. We have continuous discussions with the First Vice-President and the President on this issue. This is also, by the way, a topic that we have discussed with the political commission of the Taliban, which has strong views on it. I think that you can have confidence that this and human rights are the two critical issues that we discuss continuously with the Afghan government as we talk about the upcoming pledging conference.

We have also focused on the need for prosecutions to be completed, and for the appropriate monitoring and accountability to be put in place to ensure that once investigations take place the full prosecution process unfolds.

I would say that we are seeing some encouraging signs of increased accountability, both with the President and the Cabinet. All senior political figures and civil servants must register their assets and identify their financial holdings.

We are seeing some serious attempts. Is it enough? No. It continues to be and will continue to be an area of focus. We are hoping that by the time we get to the pledging conference we will see these two demands of a revised strategy by the government on anti-corruption and the anti-corruption commission put in place.

We are also working very closely with the ombudsperson's office recently appointed by the President. We are working in a number of areas to highlight this and to bring the government and the international community to a common agreement about what must be done before we get to Geneva, and then of course clarifying in the accountability accord going forward what we must see by way of improvement on the corruption front.

At this point, I do not think it is my place to compare the existing President and the previous President. I think that both Presidents have seen this as a top priority for the international community and both have attempted to ensure that measures are put in place, but, as I said, we are nowhere near where we need to be. Thank you for the question.

Q15 Lord Mendelsohn: Ambassador, thank you for your excellent evidence so far. May we get your view of the condition and impact of the global pandemic on Afghanistan, which of course was an early location for the virus with the first positive case at some point in February in the western city of Herat?

After a significant rise in cases, the government put widespread containment measures in place, but Health Minister Osmani has recently suggested that possibly a third of the population—some 10 million people—have Covid-19.

Will you give us some understanding of how you see the situation on the ground and how serious it is? Will you also give us your view on the response of the government and the likely consequences and challenges ahead for them in dealing with the pandemic?

Deborah Lyons: Thank you so much for that. As with so many countries in the world, Afghanistan was hit by the coronavirus, and of course for a country such as this, with very limited medical services, there was a great deal of fear and concern that the impact would be devastating. The number of cases was significant and the number of deaths was significant. Some 39,000 people officially tested positive for the virus and there were around 1,500 deaths. The impact on the health of the people and the socio-economic impact were considerable. I think the World Bank said that due to the coronavirus the GDP of Afghanistan was probably going to drop somewhere between 5% and 7%. We have also seen a significant rise, anywhere between 10% to 25%, in the cost of fuel and of foodstuffs. This socio-economic impact will endure longer than the first wave of the virus itself.

The ability of Afghanistan to respond to the crisis, though, also concerned us. There were limited medical facilities, and I think it was a challenge for the Ministry of Public Health to ensure that the right assessments were in place, that the testing facilities were available and that the drugs and the equipment were delivered to all the districts of Afghanistan.

I think we have learned a lot from this first wave, if I could call it that. Afghanistan, in many ways, has survived this first wave, at least from a health perspective, possibly better than many countries of the same size. As I said, the socio-economic impact will endure. What I am most worried about is the possibility of a second wave, which will hit us during the winter in what will be an indoor environment. We might see a much larger health impact and we need to be ready for that.

Thankfully, we have learned from the first wave in working with hospitals throughout the country and working with medical staff, who were hard hit by the virus. Some 10% of the cases were within front-line health workers themselves.

There is no question but that it has had an impact. It has had an impact on the women of Afghanistan, as in other countries, in that we saw an increase in domestic violence during the lockdown. It has also had a huge impact on the very large informal element of the economy.

The socio-economic impacts will endure. We are dealing with those now with our humanitarian effort, working with the donors and UN agencies. From another health perspective, our concern lies with the fact that during the time of the impact many people did not go and receive the essential health services they required, so now we are facing a crisis in polio vaccinations and treatment for tuberculosis. In the coming months, we will face a huge humanitarian effort just to compensate for that and at the same time prepare for the second wave.

This is being done in the middle of a heightened period of violence. We continue to call for a humanitarian ceasefire both out of the UN, with countries such as the UK, and in the first round of the talks in Doha to encourage both sides to bring the level of violence down so that we can get out there with the humanitarian response that is needed post this first wave of Covid.

Q16 Lord Alton of Liverpool: First, may I thank the ambassador for the clarity and the candour with which she has given her evidence to our Committee today?

She will not be surprised that as British parliamentarians we would be particularly interested to know how she characterises the UK's involvement in and support for Afghanistan, particularly in the context of the United Nations but other international institutions as well. Specifically, given the UK's support for the Rome Statute and the International Criminal Court, and therefore for the ICC's inquiry into Afghanistan, what is your assessment of the decision to impose sanctions on the Chief Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, and what is your assessment of the impact that may have on the inquiry into Afghanistan itself?

Deborah Lyons: The UK is a significant and highly respected country not just in Afghanistan but in this whole region. The UK has history in this region and has played an exceptional role in supporting the people of Afghanistan in the last two decades in particular. The UK is seen as a real friend to Afghanistan. For myself, as the SRSG for the United Nations, the UK is a critical partner. I have mentioned already the important role you played in truly leading the efforts here on the ground in anti-corruption and the role you are playing as head of the UN Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan.

The UK has also been a significant donor to the development and humanitarian efforts here in Afghanistan. You have played a huge role—a significant role, obviously—not just in the coalition forces but in helping to train the Afghan military and the Afghan police. I see the partnership with the UK as very strong within the UN family. I know you are working very closely with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. You are working very closely with the Finns now as we prepare for the pledging conference.

You also have been particularly helpful to me, perhaps in a way that you do not quite realise. Our senior military adviser is a wonderful brigadier general from the UK forces, General Lyne, and, let me tell you, I am really not sure what I would do without him. His advice is incredible and he brings a wonderful British perspective that is both wise and insightful, with just the right amount of British humour. Thank you for his incredible contribution. It has sustained us. As I mentioned earlier, it will help us as we continue to sort through the various priorities that we are engaging in to ensure that we are getting our full impact of the full UN family and the diplomatic community in supporting peace.

As I am sure you understand, the ICC is an organisation that works in parallel with UNAMA and the work we are doing here. The Chief Prosecutor has taken a decision and the organisation will move forward on it. Some countries are a little more supportive than others—let me say that—and I think we will have to see how that plays out.

We will continue to do the important work that we have to do here on the ground and hope that others will continue to conduct the very wise and careful set of activities that are always done in support of a better future for Afghanistan, as compared with the many other motivations that may exist. Let me leave it at that.

The Chair: I promised Lord Reid that if there was time—we have about three minutes left—I would return to some of the text of question 4. Lord Reid, would you like to ask that and we will see if we have time for the response?

Q17 **Lord Reid of Cardowan:** Will you make a quick comment on your assessment of the relationship and the agreement between President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, and, in particular, how stable it is? To what extent does it form the basis for the resolution of ongoing tension? Is there, in your view, a need for revision of the Afghan constitution?

Deborah Lyons: Thank you very much, Lord Reid. I am happy we have a chance to come back to that question, because I heard a little bit of that discussion in your earlier session.

I guess what I would say, as I am sure you understand even better than me, is that politics is a very difficult game. It is a difficult arena. I was here in 2014 when Dr Abdullah and President Ghani formed the unity government and I got to be here as they established their political agreement back in the middle of May.

These things are never easy, of course, but I think that both President Ghani and Dr Abdullah put country first. They said, “Whatever our disagreements are, it is absolutely critical at this time, with the Covid threat and for the future development of our country, and most particularly with the peace negotiations, that we create the most unified and consolidated, strong government that we can going into these peace negotiations and to deal with what is in front of us”.

It is not always easy, of course, but that agreement identified that Dr Abdullah would share the cabinet postings, the ambassadorial postings, the senior official postings, et cetera. We have finally seen in the last few weeks—some three months later, I would agree—the completion of those commitments as the cabinet announcements now go forward to the Parliament for confirmation. As the ambassadorial assignments and the assignment of governors are in place, President Ghani and Dr Abdullah are working through those elements to ensure that they have a government representative of both sides and the wider Afghan community.

In addition, it is important to note that they have put together what I would call a superstructure or infrastructure for peace. They have established a National Council for Peace and Reconciliation. They have established a state Ministry of Peace. Three months ago, together they announced the 21-member team of the negotiating team for the government, which is made up from people from a wide section of Afghanistan. People are concerned that it may not be representative enough, but we may see more changes. The negotiating team has been reaching out to civil society, and to others, to try to engage people throughout Afghanistan in discussions about peace.

We are seeing a peace structure, and, let us face it, these peace talks are the most critical issue facing the government right now, where President Ghani has truly given Dr Abdullah the lead in the critical discussion in front of the government. I think the trusting relationship between the two of them is manifested by that.

It is not always easy. Even the day before the talks opened there was some concern about whether Dr Abdullah was going to be the main representative of the government or whether it would be shared with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the end it was Dr Abdullah who represented the government in the opening talks.

Both sides continue to struggle, but they are putting the country first and identifying that these peace talks need to have a united Afghan government negotiating team that is backed up by both of them.

You asked me about revisions to the constitution, and of course, as you would know, that is up to the Afghan people and the Afghan government representatives, the political community, and others to determine. I think we will need to see. The constitution has held very strong in the last two decades, but as the two parties discuss the sharing of government—what kind of country they want, what sort of society they want, the values, and how that is reflected in the constitution—it is yet to be determined whether that would require changes to the constitution.

We should all pay close attention to that. We should provide technical expertise and scholars. Other peace negotiations have been through this challenge before. At this stage of the game it is far too early to decide one way or the other what, if any, revisions would be required.

We should continue to reinforce for both President Ghani and Dr Abdullah our support in continuing a coherent, cohesive and unified leadership team for the people of Afghanistan. It is sorely needed these days. Thank you, Lord Reid.

The Chair: Ambassador, it is for me on behalf of the Committee to thank you very much indeed for your contribution today and to thank you, too, for your flexibility over time. Your contribution will be a valuable asset to our inquiry. Thank you for joining us today.

Deborah Lyons: Thank you so much.