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The Rt Hon. The Baroness Anelay of St. Johns DBE
Chair
International Relations and Defence Committee
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

10 November 2020

Dear Baroness Anelay,

I am writing in response to the Committee's request for further information on Afghanistan. Following the oral evidence session on 9 September, the Committee requested on the record information about the drugs trade; the role of Afghanistan's neighbours and other countries interested in Afghan affairs; and the role of women.

Drugs Trade

You asked about the significance of the drugs trade to Afghanistan's economy (including its impact on the legitimate economy); which different factions which profit from it, including drug trafficking networks; and the impact of this on the UK's national security.

Afghanistan's economy is now highly dependent on opium. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the overall value of the opium economy in 2018 (between \$1.2 billion and \$2.2 billion) was equivalent to 6%–11% of the country's legitimate GDP. The value of opiates available for export in 2018 (between \$1.1 billion and \$2.1 billion) was much larger than the combined value of all legitimate exports (US\$875 million). Methamphetamine production is also an emerging trend contributing large profits to the illegal drugs trade in Afghanistan.

The country's statistical authority (NSIA) includes the opium economy in one version of its annual GDP calculation. The NSIA reported that a drop in estimated opium production of nearly 30% in 2018 - due to drought caused the Afghan economy to contract by 0.2%. By contrast, an increase in opium production of nearly 90% in 2017 resulted in GDP growth of 7.2%. In the same year, the IMF, which does not include the narcotics trade in its GDP calculations, estimated GDP growth was 2.7%. This consisted of legitimate trade in commodities such as foodstuffs (i.e. grapes, figs and tomatoes), resins and vegetable saps, rugs and cotton.

In March 2020, the World Bank found that while violence in Afghanistan had a negative impact on legitimate economic activity, it did not materially affect overall economic activity because of the high prevalence of poppy cultivation. Violence and instability caused by the ongoing insurgency exacerbates Afghan Government and international efforts to eradicate poppy production and provide alternatives to it. Organised crime groups in Afghanistan involved in drug trafficking use the profits from illegal drugs to fund other forms of criminal operations, including buying illegal firearms and financing terrorism. The crime groups move their drugs overland, using concealment methods, corrupt networks and alternative routes to avoid interdiction. Afghanistan's central location allows multiple routes to and through neighbouring countries. The Balkans route is the primary corridor for traffickers, especially Western Balkan organised crime groups, moving Afghan opiates through Iran and Turkey to user markets in Europe.

We assess that ninety-five percent of the heroin on UK streets originates from Afghanistan. The UK works closely with Afghan and international partners to disrupt serious and organised criminality, including by the Taliban, linked to the Afghan drugs trade. The National Crime Agency (NCA) works closely with the Afghan authorities to counter the flow of drugs to the UK and Europe from Afghanistan. It focusses on tackling illicit finance and serious organised crime and on the dismantling and disruption of supply chains. This strategy achieves considerable success, including through developing the intelligence and investigative capability of Afghan authorities, enabling effective targeting and arrest of criminals and malign actors who benefit from the profits of narcotics and, continue to degrade rule of law.

External states

A number of regional and international states play a significant role in Afghanistan's political, diplomatic and security environment.

The influence of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours: Pakistan, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan; and countries in the region: India, Russia and the Gulf nations of the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar is felt strongly in Afghanistan. These countries share cultural links, and historical relations between political leaders, which influence Afghan culture, and politics today.

From a security perspective, NATO has played a central role in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. Today, the non-combat Resolute Support Mission (RSM) is centred around training, advising and assisting the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). There are 38 troop-contributing nations to RSM with the UK as the third largest contributor, behind Germany and the US.

Afghanistan's immediate neighbours are key partners in countering security threats from cross-border terrorism, serious organised crime and narcotics, as well as managing bilateral issues. Both Pakistan and Iran share long borders with Afghanistan and host large populations of Afghan migrants and refugees. Issues relating to climate change and the environment link them. These may also become issues of contention, for example water rights. The flow of arms, narcotics and militants across Afghanistan's borders presents a risk that it is in all countries' interests to help manage effectively. We encourage co-operation and dialogue between Afghanistan and its neighbours to address shared interests and concerns, including through the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS).

Afghanistan's neighbours support diplomatically an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process to achieve a sustainable political settlement. Some have previously themselves offer to mediate talks. Intense efforts by US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad led to "the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan", signed by the US and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar on 29 February. Several countries, notably Pakistan, assisted efforts to arrive at this agreement. The US-Taliban agreement paved the way for direct peace talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. It is hoped that these intra-Afghan negotiations will offer

a genuine opportunity to end decades of conflict, since only a political settlement can bring sustainable peace. The opening ceremony in Doha of the intra-Afghan negotiations on 12 September demonstrated the strong level of regional support for the Afghan peace process and included statements from the foreign ministers of Pakistan, India, China, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan and Indonesia have also dedicated significant resources to support Qatar as host of the talks.

We continue to urge regional states to recognise their shared interests in a stable Afghanistan, and avoid any detrimental and counter-productive efforts, which would prolong or exacerbate the conflict. They must prevail upon the Taliban to honour their commitments to ensure that Afghanistan is not used as a base for international terrorism. They should urge the Taliban to reduce levels of violence to ensure the success of the Afghan peace negotiations, which should consider a comprehensive ceasefire. Regional states do not favour restoration of the Taliban Emirate of the 1990s.

Regional actors have also been actively supporting reconstruction and socio-economic development in Afghanistan to assist in the recovery from 40 years of continuous conflict. Economic support to Afghanistan will contribute to greater security and stability, which will in turn incentivise and enable further investment. China, India and Uzbekistan are among the countries, which have enhanced efforts to provide development assistance, trade and investment to Afghanistan, including for China in the extractives sector. The UK is directly supporting regional economic cooperation, including with £38.5 million over four years to the Asia Regional Trade and Connectivity Programme (ARTCP) and £31 million over seven years to the Central Asia South Asia power project (CASA-1000). This work helps to realise, for people across the region, the tangible economic and developmental benefits of a stable Afghanistan connected into the region and thereby provides an incentive for countries to support this aim.

Afghanistan faces many, very serious challenges in the short and medium term to emerge successfully from 40 years of shifting conflict. As immediate priorities, it must find a route to reconciliation with the Taliban. This will involve forging a new political and social identity; fortify the institutions of good governance; and set a path to genuinely sustainable development that benefits all Afghans across the country and insulates them from global phenomena of climate change, pandemics and economic shocks. Co-ordination amongst and support from the international community of neighbours, the region and the wider world has the potential to assist these efforts, but they are ultimately for Afghans to lead and shape.

Role of Women

The role of women in Afghan society has improved significantly since 2001. The Afghan constitution grants men and women equal rights. The constitution includes a provision for reserved seats for women in the Afghan Parliament. 28% of parliamentarians are currently women. In September, President Ghani appointed a female acting minister to oversee the economic portfolio, bringing the number of female ministers to four (about 16% of the cabinet).

Women have had an increasingly active role in law, the media, business and security. Over 280 female officers have graduated since 2014 from the Afghanistan National Army Officers Academy, an initiative led by the UK, increasing the potential number of women in officer-level, decision-making roles in the military. Overall, women represent about 3% of the Afghan security forces, and this has remained stable over a number of years.

Over 3.5 million girls attend school, representing 39% of children enrolled. Access to schooling in rural areas, especially districts controlled by the Taliban, remains challenging. The lack of women teachers exacerbates this; an estimated 2.2 million girls were out-of-school in Afghanistan in 2019. Over the last three years, the UK has helped more than 300,000 girls attend school through the Girls' Education Challenge Fund. The second phase of this

programme, which launched last year, is supporting more than 70,000 marginalised girls' to access education.

Afghanistan remains a deeply conservative society. Life for many Afghan women, particularly in rural areas is tightly controlled. The strictly patriarchal society can mean restricted freedom of movement and limited access to education and basic services. Major challenges remain in relation to political participation, economic empowerment and gender-based violence. In areas controlled by the Taliban, improvements for women and in their role remain particularly fragile. In 2019, Afghanistan was ranked the second worst country in the world for women's well-being (Georgetown Institute Women Peace Security Index 2019/20).

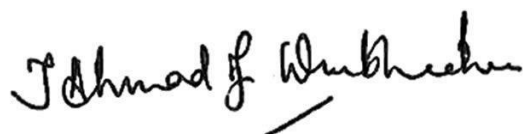
There is genuine concern about the possibility of a return to conditions that would restrict children's rights to education and women's access to services and the workplace, including roles in public office. The Taliban have yet to give concrete assurances that, in a future political arrangement, girls will be able to attend school and women will be able to work. We remain concerned and continue to make clear to all sides that a political settlement must protect and build on the progress made in the country, including protection for women and minorities. International partners support this.

International evidence shows that peace deals are more likely to be reached and sustained when women's groups and voices are meaningfully involved. There are four women in the 21-member Afghan Government negotiating team.

Women's meaningful participation in discussions on peace is a core part of the UK's Conflict, Stability & Security Fund Peace and Reconciliation Programme in Afghanistan, with almost a quarter of spend dedicated to Women, Peace and Security (WPS)-focused activities at both the national and grassroots level. This includes capacity-building support to the Afghan Government negotiation team, women's networks and civil society organisations.

Afghanistan is a focus country for WPS in the UK National Action Plan (NAP) 2018-2022. The FCDO's Gender Unit has designated Afghanistan as a priority country for women's inclusion in peace processes for the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 on WPS. Our support to women and girls in Afghanistan is led by the needs and desires of Afghans. Our UN mission co-hosts the Group of Friends of Women of Afghanistan alongside the Afghan Mission. They have held a number of meetings to provide an international platform for a diverse range of Afghan women to discuss their priorities. We continue to work with our international partners in supporting the Afghan Government to enhance the inclusivity of negotiations and promote gender equality.

Yours sincerely,



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