**Oral Update of Mr. Richard Bennett
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan**

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 *Check against delivery*

Mr. vice-president,

Distinguished delegates,

Colleagues and friends

I am honoured to share this panel with the High Commissioner and distinguished Afghan and international experts.

While the Council has asked me for an oral update, I will endeavour not to duplicate the High Commissioner or the information in his report. Rather, I echo his concerns.

Regrettably, I can report few grounds for optimism. Since I reported to this Council in June, the Taliban has further intensified its violations of the human rights of the Afghan population, particularly women and girls.

As the High Commissioner noted, recently a law was promulgated empowering the de facto Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Not only does it reinforce the Taliban’s institutionalized system of sex and gender discrimination, segregation, and oppression – in short, gender persecution, a crime against humanity - it impacts almost the entire population. Unaddressed, the repercussions will shape future generations.

For example, women and girls, already barred from education beyond the sixth grade, must travel everywhere with a mahram and face punishment if even the sound of their voices is heard in public. While it’s too soon to assess the full impact of the law, including regional variations in implementation, I have spoken with Afghans in several provinces describe to me a visible increase in the presence of so-called morality inspectors as well as tightening restrictions, in particular on their freedom of movement. We have also received information from multiple sources that barbers are instructed not to shave men’s beards shorter than the specified length, while the ban on broadcasting of images of human beings is impacting the media. This law marks a new stage in the ongoing regression in the respect for human rights since August 2021, especially the rights of women and girls.

Mr. vice-president,

In Afghanistan, religious, ethnic, and linguistic minorities are facing ongoing attacks and violence in addition to restrictions on their ability to practice their faith, speak their language, and express their cultural identities, with Hazaras suffering more than most. It is time to pay more attention to this. Afghanistan has one of the world’s youngest populations. I am especially concerned about the protection and human rights of children.

LGBTQI+ individuals, long subjected to systemic discrimination and persecution, now endure even more severe violence, including public flogging. Older people, and those with disabilities are also bearing the brunt of human rights violations, while the worsening humanitarian crisis leaves the most vulnerable facing extreme suffering.

Severe restrictions, threats, intimidation, and violence make it nearly impossible for journalists and human rights defenders to operate freely. Independent reporting and advocacy are met with harsh reprisals and imprisonment, silencing any dissenting voices.

The cumulative effects of these oppressive policies and human rights violations perpetuate a climate of fear and repression that affects every segment of Afghan society.

Following my initial visit to in 2022, I observed that the country stood at a crossroads and there was a gap between the words of the de facto authorities and their actions. Now, both their words and their actions are harsher; they claim that human rights are an internal matter rather than expressing some willingness to respect their international human rights treaty obligations. They reject virtually all assessments and recommendations by human rights experts, whether Afghan or otherwise, consistent with their intolerance of any dissenting views and in my case they have decided to refuse to allow me to visit. Having reached the crossroads they appear to have taken the turn that leads to the appalling conditions of the late 1990s. Collectively, we must persuade them to reverse and take the other direction.

Mr. vice-president,

The human rights crisis in Afghanistan is not three years old, Human rights have been violated throughout the country’s 4.5 decades of conflict. All parties to the conflict are responsible and must be held accountable. Regrettably, impunity has prevailed in Afghanistan for generations. It is among the main causes of conflict and repression in the country. Failure to effectively tackle the cycle of impunity, not only emboldens the Taliban’s oppressive regime and reduces possibility of genuine and durable peace in Afghanistan and beyond, it does a huge disservice to all victims and survivors. I welcome the conclusion of the High Commissioner’s report that highlights the need for a comprehensive approach, taking into account several principles that should guide accountability – in fact transitional justice efforts - in line with international standards. This parallels my previous calls for an “all tools approach”.

I urge the Council to identify survivor-centered and gender-responsive pathways to justice and, in addition to strengthening and supporting existing mechanisms to fill any gaps so that the situation in Afghanistan receives a response that is proportionate to its gravity.

I also urge Member States to include women and non-Taliban Afghans in any process about the future of the country and to place human rights at the centre.

To date, the collective response has fallen far short. Member states and regional bodies have yet to take effective action to counter the Taliban’s behaviour nor is there a principled, coherent, and coordinated strategy among international actors to improve the situation. A fragmented and piecemeal approach, with some turning a blind eye to the Taliban’s violations and abuses, not only fails the people of Afghanistan but also contradicts States' own human rights commitments. Any normalization of engagement with the de facto authorities must be based on demonstrated, measurable, and independently verified improvements in human rights.

I thank you.