**Third Committee of the 79th Session of the General Assembly**

**Interactive Dialogue by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Mr. Richard Bennett**

New York City, 1 November 2024

*Check against delivery*
Madame Chair,

Distinguished delegates,

More than three years after the Taliban seized power, my report traverses a range of very serious human rights violations perpetrated against many sectors of Afghan society, foremost among them women and girls. This may come as no surprise to delegates here, but the grim situation should not lead us to despair or complacency; rather it demands urgent attention and should galvanize this Assembly, other intergovernmental and regional bodies and individual states into taking decisive action.

Some positive developments asserted by the Taliban in areas such as security, anti-corruption and counter-narcotics, which have led to improvements in humanitarian and other access, especially to remote areas, are, regrettably, seriously undermined by their rejection of or withdrawal from the State’s human rights obligations and cooperation with my mandate. I have noted a more aggressive tone this year, for example instead of promising that schools for girls will reopen after a period of review, the de facto authorities now state that this and other matters relating to human rights are an internal matter.

My report details the Taliban's systematic gender oppression, amounting to gender persecution, and which is described as gender apartheid by many Afghans.

The new so called law “Vice and Virtue law” institutionalizes an expanding list of restrictions that blatantly violate the rights of women and girls. It also impacts the entire society, including men, religious minorities and journalists, as it infringes on their cultural rights, religious freedoms, and freedom of expression.

Women are literally silenced and are being seen as a threat to the Taliban’s vision and strategy.

I have also documented shrinking civic space, pressure on minorities, and ongoing threats, torture, and extra- judicial killings of former government and security personnel, protesters, judges, and lawyers, as well as corporal punishments and credible allegations of sexual violence during detention.

Economic and social rights are unfulfilled due to chronic underfunding amid a humanitarian crisis with more than half the population requiring humanitarian assistance, exacerbated by Taliban policies. Justice, equality, and the rule of law are being systematically disregarded. Those most vulnerable—children, widows, persons with disabilities, LGBTI persons, and those facing intersecting forms of discrimination—are disproportionately affected.

I am deeply concerned about the plight of ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Hazara community, who continue to be violently targeted, especially by Daesh, and further experience discrimination and sidelining by the de facto authorities in many aspects of their lives. Many of them are Shia Muslims who are unjustifiably restricted in freely manifesting their own religion, including during the month of Muharram. There is an urgent need for accountability and effective protection measures.

The space for the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly has diminished significantly. Human rights defenders—especially women—, journalists, and civil society members face threats, intimidation, and harassment. Some of those detained report serious ill-treatment. Local organizations encounter bureaucratic hurdles and censorship from the de facto authorities.

**Madam Chair, how can the human rights situation be improved?**
The international community needs a unified approach. It should devise, adopt and implement a comprehensive, coordinated human rights-centered action plan. Right here in New York, Member States supported by the UN Secretariat, should also leverage the [women, peace and security agenda](https://dppa.un.org/en/women-peace-and-security); last November’s [independent assessment on Afghanistan](http://www.undocs.org/S/2023/856) and the authority of both the Security Council and the General Assembly that will have a resolution on Afghanistan during the current session.

The lack of a strong, united response from the international community has already emboldened the Taliban. Within a month of participating in the third Doha meeting, they introduced a so called “morality” law not only further restricting virtually every aspect of women's lives but also placing restrictions on the practices of religious minorities and curtailing the media.

For over three years, women and girls have been barred from secondary education and beyond. There are increasing concerns that the Taliban are introducing more fundamentalist madrassas to eventually replace public schools, threatening to further limit educational opportunities and promoting a narrow, possibly extremist ideology. This shift poses significant risks to the future of Afghan youth and the overall stability of the country with a potential global impact.

I meet Afghan youth regularly, including last week as they represent the majority of the country’s population, and they are the future. They are talented and inspiring, but however, they are leaving the country reluctantly as they see little hope to fulfil their potential. How can they be given hope? What are the implications for girls and boys who grow up in a society that dehumanizes women and girls?

**Madam Vice- Chair, what more needs doing?**

I advocate for an “all tools approach,” rooted in human rights, which includes:

* Making it clear to the Taliban that demonstrable improvements in human rights is a prerequisite for any normalisation.
* Ensuring survivor-centered pathways to justice and accountability through existing mechanisms in The Hague and Geneva and also leveraging New York-based ones.
* Codifying gender apartheid as a crime against humanity, noting that the first step is to ensure that a treaty is a whole is agreed on.
* Ensuring the meaningful inclusion of Afghan voices, especially women’s voices, in political processes and diplomatic engagements.
* Reinforcing support and funding for Afghan women, girls, human rights defenders, marginalized communities, organizations and
* Keeping Afghanistan firmly on the international agenda.

These are urgent and practical actions to support the people of Afghanistan. We must send a clear message to the Taliban: there will be consequences for violations of human rights. We need to demonstrate to Afghans that the international community stands with them—not just in words, but through decisive actions.

The Afghan people are displaying remarkable courage and resilience. I have spoken with young women defying the Taliban to pursue education, journalists risking their lives to report on human rights violations, female lawyers preparing defence cases, and humanitarian workers tirelessly providing assistance. Their bravery and determination must be matched by our unwavering support and solidarity.

I look forward to your questions and for your continued support.

Thank you.