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International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn: Priorities for action

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It is ten years since the international intervention in Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban regime. The 2001 Bonn Agreement that followed aimed, as it stated, to ‘end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability and respect for human rights in the country’. Important progress has been made since then. But as the Afghan government and their international partners prepare to meet in Bonn again this December, Afghanistan is still far from reaching the commitments and benchmarks set in Bonn ten years ago.

The 2011 Bonn Conference comes at a juncture where a concrete change of direction in the strategy on Afghanistan is vital. Military ‘transition’ is underway with the majority of international troops set to withdraw by the end of 2014 and Afghan security forces already starting to take over responsibility for security across much of the country.

As the short-term economic dividends of the international military presence start to recede, a more comprehensive long-term aid and development strategy is needed to prioritise generating livelihoods, providing basic services and tackling poverty. Huge challenges remain also before ordinary Afghans are able to exercise many of their basic human rights, have access to justice and a functioning legal system to lawfully settle their grievances, and be able to influence their future properly through democratic structures. And across all these spheres, Afghan women face entrenched discrimination and disadvantage, and fears that hard-won gains of recent years may be under threat. It is now widely acknowledged that there is no military solution to the end of the conflict and there must ultimately be a political settlement to achieve this – though there is much less clarity from governments on a comprehensive strategy for how an agreement should be reached, who should be involved in negotiating it and what its parameters should be. Many Afghans fear that as the international troops withdraw, the international community’s civilian commitment to the country will vanish too. This must not happen.

With leaders and ministers from more than 90 countries coming together again in Bonn to discuss Afghanistan’s future, together with the UN and

relevant international stakeholders, the Conference marks a real chance to address all these pressing issues. It must build on the important meetings in November of regional governments hosted by the Turkish Government in Istanbul which aimed to promote regional security and economic cooperation – as well as the Loya Jirga (national political assembly) in Afghanistan. The Bonn Conference needs to chart a new course of action: away from generalised resolutions to concrete steps forward; away from counter-insurgency towards addressing the root causes of conflict and the poverty and inequality which drives it; away from quick-fixes towards sustainable development; and away from trading away people’s rights towards empowering civil society, women and vulnerable communities.

We fully support the work of Afghan civil society organisations as they articulate their positions in relation to the Bonn conference. As international humanitarian, development, human rights, women’s rights and peace-building organisations from many countries working closely with Afghans across the country, often amongst the poorest and most deprived communities, we set out below our recommendations on the three key areas that will be discussed at the Conference.

Reconciliation and an inclusive political settlement

Many now recognise that a major flaw in the first Bonn Conference in 2001 and the agreement that followed was its failure to involve all parties to the conflict and social groups in the peace talks to secure a sustainable settlement and the neglect of those who have survived past atrocities. The approach to support for reconciliation in Bonn 2011 needs to be inclusive. It must endorse ultimately involving all those with a role in the conflict and representatives of all those with a legitimate interest in what a settlement should look like, to ensure an agreement is viable and sustainable. The conference needs to make clear, also, that there can be no lasting peace in Afghanistan without the constructive involvement and support of the countries in the region as well as the wider international community.

At a national level it is critical that an inclusive approach is taken, involving representatives of all geographical and ethnic backgrounds, civil society and particularly women. The participation of women in peace and reconciliation processes must be a priority along with ensuring women's rights are guaranteed in all negotiations. Additionally, it is crucial that the peace process becomes more accountable, as there is very low trust in the talks currently being conducted from both the Afghan public and the participants themselves.

In particular we urge the international governments meeting in Bonn to:

- Demonstrate their willingness to provide strong commitment to support efforts to seek a comprehensive, inclusive and accountable political settlement as the foundation for a lasting peace, including a willingness to address regional and international grievances in order to enable Afghans to truly decide their own future. The conference should consider whether the appointment of a high-level mediator or envoy could now help drive forward a dynamic towards negotiations and a commitment to secure lasting peace rather than political quick-fix deals. It should also explore how international support for the development of an advisory structure amongst the countries of the region and for confidence-building measures and local peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives within Afghanistan could also help increase momentum towards a settlement. It should commit to seek the input of Afghan civil society on these issues.
- Secure a clear commitment to support talks about a political settlement and eventual peace agreement that are transparent and include clear mechanisms to ensure all social and ethnic groups in Afghanistan are represented in the process and there is the strong involvement of Afghan civil society representatives and relevant representative bodies, such as the parliament. It is critical that Afghan women are given meaningful participation in any peace negotiations at all levels, with at least 30% of all seats in official meetings so as to have a level of representation able to influence decisions, in line with the obligations set out in UNSC Resolution 1325 for member states to involve women in peace processes.
- Set out tangible guarantees to protect constitutional, human and civil rights, particularly women's rights, in any negotiations and eventual political settlement – especially the rights of women and girls to be educated, to work, to travel freely, and participate in public life and hold public office, including guarantees for strong representation of women in parliament.
- Give clear backing for accountable processes to address human rights abuses committed by all sides in the conflict, ensure there is no impunity for past crimes and provide redress for victims in ways that address the need for reconciliation. This should include providing practical advice and support for mechanisms to achieve this and ensuring greater participation by relatives of victims and their communities in the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme.

Transition of security responsibilities

Delegates to the Bonn Conference will assess progress on security transition from international to Afghan forces while there are growing concerns among Afghans about increased insecurity and violence across their country. According to the UN, there were 2,777 Afghan civilian deaths in 2010, 15 percent higher than in 2009, with 80 per cent of them caused by armed opposition groups. Another almost 1,500 civilians were killed in the first six months of 2011. All the military actors in Afghanistan - national, international and anti-government - are obliged to adhere to the principles of international humanitarian law and take all steps possible to reduce and prevent civilian harm. We therefore welcome the attempts by international forces to minimise civilian casualties by pro-government forces. However, the number of civilians killed by NATO air strikes in the first half of 2011 increased by 14 per cent. At least 11 children were killed. Night raids – around 300 per month being conducted by national and international security forces – have continued to generate fear, distrust and anger amongst Afghan civilians. We believe that the Bonn Conference can, and must, make a stronger commitment to better protect Afghan civilians as the transition proceeds.

In particular we urge the international governments meeting in Bonn to:

- Commit to practical action to ensure that the professionalisation of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is an integral part of the transition strategy, and that the accountability of the ANSF, and their readiness and capability to protect the Afghan population, is at its heart. All components of the ANSF must receive practical, quality training in international human rights and humanitarian law as appropriate to their rank and duties. Training for the Afghan National Police (ANP) must be expanded beyond the present eight week courses for police officers and include more emphasis on community-based policing, good governance, the rule of law and accountability.
- Ensure systems are in place so that incidents causing civilian harm and misconduct of national or international troops are properly documented and followed by credible and transparent investigations, with subsequent appropriate penalties to be enforced where applicable. All those affected must be offered appropriate amends (including apologies, investigations, a tangible gesture of recognition, guarantees of non-repetition and compensation), with compensation being provided promptly, uniformly and systematically to all civilian victims of conflict-related casualties and human rights violations.
- Ensure that developing accountable, civilian and professional non-military security services is given as high a priority as reform of the military services given their critical role in ensuring ordinary people can go about their daily lives. Policing must be accountable and driven by public service, so further expansion of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) Programme and the development of other auxiliary forces must be suspended, until appropriate vetting, training and a sustained period of oversight can be assured and credible, independent monitoring mechanisms are established to prevent perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses from becoming part of the national security forces without

appropriate controls. There must be greater efforts to increase the number of women in the police force, given that women face particular threats to their safety.

Long-term commitment to Afghanistan after 2014

While much focus has been on the military and security transition, there is also a pressing need to formulate and agree a clear and transparent plan for civilian development during the transition period and post 2014. Despite progress in some sectors, Afghanistan remains one of the poorest nations on earth. Despite billions of dollars of aid, one in five children will still die before their fifth birthday. Less than 15 per cent of women are literate, while according to one major study 87 per cent of them suffer domestic abuse. Over the past decade, too much aid has been spent to meet the short-term military objectives of ISAF-contributing nations rather than to address the needs of Afghan men, women and children.

For example, many Afghans have welcomed the new clinics and schools that have been built since 2001. Progress has certainly been made in improving the quality and quantity of health and education provision from the standards of a decade ago. However, recent public opinion research carried out in 14 provinces by the Afghan NGO network ACBAR on perceptions of health and education services Afghans expressed major concerns with the quality of local services to which they have access.

Corruption is also a key obstacle to development, with Afghanistan currently second to last on the Transparency Corruption Index. In turn, the international community must recognise the role that its support (as well as the large amount of money it invests) plays in fuelling corruption, reinforcing the need for practical measures to increase transparency and accountability.

In particular we urge the international governments meeting in Bonn to:

- Agree clear new commitments on how they will provide long-term development assistance in a coherent and sustainable way. Such assistance must address the needs and rights of Afghans, and not be subordinated to security and military objectives. It should not be overly focused

on areas in the country affected by conflict at the expense of more peaceful, but still poor, areas. This must include intensifying efforts for economic development focused on alleviating poverty, creating jobs and generating income, and building up the capacity of key institutions as a critical factor in creating social stability and people's belief in building a better future for their community. It must also direct greater support to improving access to, and quality of, basic services for Afghans, especially education, health and justice. Support for developing the state infrastructure needed to underpin such critical public services will also be vital. Across all these areas, there must be greater emphasis on programmes specifically aimed at breaking down barriers for women to job opportunities and access to basic services as well as institutions paying special attention to the needs of children.

- Commit to strong measures to ensure aid is delivered in a transparent and accountable manner, including through utilising target groups and local communities to engage in the design, implementation and monitoring of projects and supporting the Afghan judiciary to prosecute cases of corruption. Also important for ensuring the transparent and effective use of aid is coordinating its delivery- through integrated, cross-sector programmes across the Afghan government, bilateral and multilateral donors, international NGOs and Afghan civil society.
- Agree to develop their support for building the capacity of Afghan civil society organisations, democratic institutions, structures to defend human rights including the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and a free and independent media as essential components in the process of transition to normal, peaceful civilian governance. A critical priority must be to put in place action now to ensure that the elections in 2014 truly reflect the will of the Afghan people, including support for the Afghan electoral bodies and training of election officials, agents and other actors required to ensure a free and fair process.

This must go together with building the capacity of the Afghan parliament to take up any necessary electoral reforms to ensure broad participation and constitutional norms in the transition after the 2014 elections.

- Realign their financial assistance to reflect a greater balance between spending on building up national security forces and supporting judicial reform and strengthening institutions in the formal justice sector within their strategy for long-term engagement – including priority areas such as the protection of judges, increasing the participation of women in the judicial system and the training of lawyers and judges.
- Commit to strongly engage in the current review of the UN's role in Afghanistan to ensure that in the future the UN system in the country is mandated and resourced sufficiently to fulfill its core functions. A strong role for the UN in Afghanistan must include: supporting Afghan-led democratic and electoral reforms; facilitating the delivery of basic services and equitable development; monitoring the protection of civilians; strengthening the rule of law; ensuring human rights and access to justice; and providing good offices and other assistance in support of an inclusive peace process and reconciliation.

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Supporting organisations

- Afgana – (Italy)
- Afghanaid – (UK)
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