

A WIN-LOSE CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN

by

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A two-day UN Conference called the “Doha Process” on Afghanistan took place on the June 30 and July 1 in Doha. This was the third meeting to discuss Afghanistan’s engagement with the international community, a process which UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres had initiated in May 2023. The de facto Taliban government participated for the first time in this meeting.

The group was not invited to the first meeting in 2023. It declined to participate in the [second meeting](#) in February 2024 after its demand to meet the UN Secretary-General as the sole representative of Afghanistan was not met. Due to their absence, other groups, including Afghan women, were represented and their issues were discussed at length. However, this time, [women representatives from Afghanistan were excluded](#) from attending the meeting.

The UN-led meeting was presided over by UN Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo. It was [attended by delegates from nearly two dozen countries](#) including representatives from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The [delegates termed](#) the Taliban’s participation for the first time as a boon for the process without considering the absence of activists from the meeting. The UN excluded the activist groups to [ensure that the Taliban did not skip](#) the meeting as they did earlier this year.

In this regard, the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Roza Otunbayeva urged that it was important for the international community to open a direct dialogue with the Taliban. She also suggested it would open doors for Afghan women to participate in future talks. She further said that it would be the first time that the Taliban would meet face-to-face with the delegates of all the participating countries who could also broach the issue of women’s

rights with the Taliban. It is, however, unclear whether these issues were discussed during the direct meetings between the Taliban and the delegates of other participating countries.

Taliban’s Position

The Taliban agreed to take part in this meeting as other Afghan groups were not invited which gave it the chance to put its position forward. The Taliban delegation to the meeting was led by Zabiullah Mujahid, Chief Spokesperson of the group’s de facto government in Kabul. [During his address to the delegates](#), he put his group’s position forward by urging the lifting of financial and banking sanctions as it had cut off Afghanistan from the international financial system. He also urged that frozen Afghan funds should be given back to the country. He further said that due to such measures, Afghanistan’s economic progress which his de facto government has been aiming for has been hindered.

He also questioned why the process of easing sanctions on trade and financial sectors has been slowed down, which is causing various challenges to the de facto government as well as the country’s private sector. Nonetheless, he was grateful for the opportunity to hold meetings with delegates from various countries on the [sidelines](#) to discuss these issues. He additionally stated that most countries showed their willingness to cooperate with the group in resolving the issues of Afghanistan.

It is pertinent to mention here that after the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, the group was put under international sanctions, and the Afghan Central Bank’s funds worth USD 7 billion were frozen by the U.S. However, in September 2022, a Geneva-based non-profit foundation, [the Fund for the Afghan People](#), was established to preserve and protect the Afghan funds. The purpose of the institute also includes target-based disbursement of funds for the betterment of the people of Afghanistan. Conversely, no funds have been disbursed to the people of Afghanistan as of June 2024.

Exclusion of Other Groups – A Win-Lose Situation

Even though a UN Official mentioned that the increasing engagement between the UN and the de facto rulers of Afghanistan [did not amount to recognition of their government](#) as the legitimate Afghan government, the absence of other groups from the meeting portrayed a picture in which it seemed to be the sole representative of the Afghan people.

In this regard, [Michael Kugelman, director South Asia Institute Wilson Center](#), highlighted that the group achieved what it wanted from this UN meeting as they put their position on the table without allowing other sides to be heard. Additionally, he said that the meeting also safeguarded the group from facing criticism as it was directed at the UN for not including the other groups, mainly Afghan women. This enabled the Taliban to play its cards well by projecting its narrative and conveying the message that it is not a pariah group as its critics want it to be, said Kugelman. Thus, the meeting can be seen from a win-lose prism where only the Taliban was successful.

Despite the strong criticism, [the UN Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo said during the press conference](#) following the meeting that the deep international concerns about serious and ongoing restrictions on women and girls in Afghanistan were discussed during the meeting with the Taliban delegation.

She further said that the respect for minorities and the need for more inclusive governance were also discussed. She stressed that the views and concerns of civil society and women were at the center of the meeting and highlighted that the inclusion of women in peace and political processes was a guiding principle for the UN.

Even though the de facto government would not sit with other groups from Afghanistan in this format, the Taliban delegation was informed about the need to include civil society and women in all spheres of public life. However, she failed to mention whether the delegate agreed to what was discussed during the

meeting or at least mentioned that it would convey the message of the international community to the Taliban leadership in Kabul.

Conclusion – A Process Going Nowhere

The Taliban are the clear winners of this meeting. The UN is a semi-winner by bringing the de facto group to the table as it is hopeful that the meeting would enable it to move a little closer to resolving some of the issues of the Afghan people who are devastated by the situation in their country. The UN also emphasized continuing the process.

However, the process seems to go nowhere without bringing all the parties to the table. Despite the affirmation that the issues of other groups were discussed in the meeting, it does not clarify how it would succeed in bringing all the parties together in the future. Without an open dialogue between all parties, the process is unlikely to bear fruitful results. Therefore, the UN and the international community should look for a win-win situation where none of the groups are excluded from the process. In this way, long-lasting peace can be achieved in Afghanistan where all groups including women and other minorities are equally represented in all aspects of life.

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