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Situation in Afghanistan, in particular the situation of women's rights

European Parliament resolution of 7 April 2022 on the situation in Afghanistan, in particular the situation of women's rights (2022/2571(RSP))

(2022/C 434/14)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to its previous resolutions on Afghanistan,

— having regard to the Taliban's announcement of the creation of the caretaker government of Afghanistan of 7 September 2021,

— having regard to the UN Resolution 2626 (2022) of 17 March 2022, on the extension of the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan,

— having regard to the UN Security Council press statement on Afghanistan of 27 March 2022,

— having regard to the list of 2021 finalists for the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought,

— having regard to the Afghan Women Days at the European Parliament on 1 and 2 February 2022,

— having regard to the statement by the Chair of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with Afghanistan of 23 March 2022 on the Taliban's announcement to extend the education ban for female students above the sixth grade, and to the related statement by the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR) of 23 March 2022,

— having regard to the declaration by the VP/HR on behalf of the European Union of 28 March 2022 calling for the immediate reopening of secondary schools for girls,

— having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

— having regard to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951,

— having regard to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 1979,

— having regard to the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the UN Global Compact on Refugees, which followed the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly on 19 September 2016,

— having regard to the EU thematic guidelines on human rights defenders, on the promotion and protection of the rights of the child, and on violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them,

— having regard to Rule 132(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the Taliban's Ministry of Education announced in a statement of 21 March 2022 that 'it is committed to the right to education of all its citizens' and was working to 'eliminate all kinds of discrimination';

B. whereas the de facto authorities of Afghanistan pledged on 15 January 2022 to allow girls to return to school at all levels after the start of the new school year in the second half of March 2022;

C. whereas girls across Afghanistan were due to return to school on 23 March 2022; whereas the Taliban have indefinitely extended the ban on allowing female students to attend seventh grade and above until they can decide which uniforms are most appropriate for girls; whereas this denies secondary level education to over one million girls and is a violation of the fundamental right to education for all children as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

D. whereas Afghanistan ranks last on the Global Women, Peace and Security Index, making it the most dangerous country for women; whereas according to UN Special Procedures, Taliban leaders are attempting to erase women and girls from public life through systematic gender-based discrimination and violence;

E. whereas since taking over the country on 15 August 2021, the Taliban have closed the Ministry of Women's Affairs and re-established the former Ministry of Vice and Virtue; whereas the Taliban have de facto abolished all previously enforced laws, including those protecting women, and have imposed harsh restrictions on exercising, the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and women's right to work, education and healthcare; whereas the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has been closed since the Taliban takeover;

F. whereas according to a new directive, Afghan women are not allowed to travel distances of more than 45 miles (72 km) from their home without the accompaniment of a close male relative; whereas this directive follows a directive issued in November 2021 that banned television stations from broadcasting programmes with female actors;

G. whereas peaceful protests for women's rights in Afghanistan are being suppressed with force; whereas human rights defenders have been abducted and no information has been shared regarding their whereabouts despite repeated pleas for their release; whereas those who have been released from custody continue to fear for their lives;

H. whereas human rights violations are being reported daily, including arrest, detention, abduction, torture, threats, extortion, extrajudicial killings and attacks on human rights defenders and their family members; whereas there continues to be a complete lack of accountability for such violations; whereas women human rights defenders have been especially impacted; whereas minority groups, such as the Hazara community, have been specifically targeted;

I. whereas poverty has led Afghan families to arrange marriages and collect dowries for their daughters and whereas there has been a 500 % increase in child marriages in Afghanistan since the implementation of the school ban for girls; whereas prior to the Taliban takeover, 35 % of girls were married before the age of 18 and 9 % before the age of 15;

J. whereas Afghanistan has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world, with thousands of women dying every year from easily preventable pregnancy-related causes; whereas the socioeconomic situation, which was already precarious prior to the Taliban takeover, has dramatically deteriorated under the de facto administration and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, severe droughts and a harsh winter;

K. whereas the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is one of the fastest deteriorating crises in the world and has been disproportionately affecting women and girls; whereas nearly 100 % of Afghan female-headed households are facing food insecurity; whereas the new policies introduced by the Taliban government have greatly affected the ability of women to make a living, pushing them further into poverty, with many women heads of household being hit especially hard;

L. whereas according to the International Organization for Migration's March 2022 report, more than 1,258 million Afghans fled their country in 2021, twice as many as in recent years; whereas at the same time, the number of internally displaced persons returning to their homes has tripled, reaching a record 3,06 million returns in 2021; whereas across the region, nearly 5 million Afghans remain displaced outside the country, 90 % of whom are hosted in Pakistan and Iran;

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M. whereas according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 35 % of women and girls have reported feeling unsafe due to gender-based violence when seeking refuge in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan; whereas only 70 % of girls are enrolled in schools there, compared to 92 % of boys;

N. whereas the EU has stepped up its support to the population by launching projects worth over EUR 268,3 million that focus on maintaining education, sustaining livelihoods and protecting public health; whereas these projects are part of the overall EUR 1 billion EU support package announced by the Commission in October 2021, which includes aid for refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons and support for human rights defenders and civil society organisations;

O. whereas according to Reporters Without Borders, 231 media outlets have been closed in Afghanistan, which amounts to 40 % of the total outlets in the country; whereas 80 % of the 6 400 journalists who have lost their jobs are women; whereas restrictions have been imposed banning local and international media, such as the BBC, and journalists have been arrested, detained and beaten;

P. whereas sanctions against Taliban-related entities and individuals should not prevent financial transactions related to humanitarian assistance and the provision of basic services by non-governmental organisations (NGOs);

Q. whereas until 15 August 2021, under the former Republic of Afghanistan, women thrived in high-level positions such as Members of Parliament, Ministers, judges, governors, lawyers and ambassadors; whereas the Taliban forces have forcibly removed legitimate former government officials and have not included women in their new unrecognised de facto government; whereas these de facto authorities lack inclusive representation of Afghanistan's diverse society;

R. whereas intelligence agencies have warned that Afghanistan must not become a safe haven for terrorist organisations;

1. Is deeply concerned about the humanitarian and human rights crisis that has been unfolding in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover; reiterates its unwavering solidarity with and commitment towards the people of Afghanistan; stresses that the basic rights and freedoms the Afghan people have enjoyed over the past 20 years should be upheld;

2. Deplores the fact that the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan has been steadily deteriorating since the Taliban takeover; condemns the Taliban's persistent focus on erasing women and girls from public life and denying their most fundamental rights, including the right to education, work, movement and healthcare;

3. Condemns, in the strongest terms, the Taliban's decision to postpone the return of girls above grade six to school indefinitely, despite their previous commitment to allow every citizen to access education; urges the Taliban to reverse their decisions and restrictions that specifically target women and girls and to reopen the Ministry of Women's Affairs;

4. Stresses that access to education for women and girls must, on the part of the EU and its Member States, constitute an essential condition for any further commitment with the de facto Afghan authorities;

5. Calls on the Taliban to uphold their commitment to ensuring the right to education for all Afghan citizens, including women and girls;

6. Deplores the Taliban's repression of peaceful women's rights protests in Afghanistan; calls for the immediate release of female police officer Alia Azizi, who was arrested in Herat in October 2021, as well as the release of any other women's rights activists that may be detained, and for the intimidation and harassment of these activists to be stopped; calls for an end to harassment, threats and attacks against teachers and students;

7. Calls on the de facto authorities to guarantee all women and girls full rights and access to reproductive healthcare across Afghanistan;

8. Expresses grave concern that since the Taliban takeover of the country, women and girls have faced an increased risk of exploitation, including the risk of being trafficked for the purposes of forced marriage, sexual exploitation and forced labour; condemns gender-based violence and discrimination;

9. Calls on the de facto Afghan authorities to form an inclusive government that involves women in the decision-making process at all levels; insists on the need to develop a new EU strategy for Afghanistan that is adapted to the situation of women and girls in order to concretely promote women's rights and their participation in public life;

10. Recalls that the EU has a solid position regarding any political engagements with the Taliban, guided by thematic benchmarks for engagement based on the principles of adherence to human rights for all and the rule of law; is of the opinion that, since 15 August 2021, there has been only a deterioration in these benchmarks, which cannot justify any de facto recognition of a Taliban government;

11. Welcomes UN Resolution 2626 (2022), which was adopted on 17 March 2022 and which extended the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan; calls for the EU and its Member States to support the mandate of the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, including by engaging with all relevant Afghan actors and stakeholders to ensure the reopening of schools for all female students without further delay;

12. Takes note of the Oslo talks of January 2022 between European and US officials and a Taliban delegation, as well as the recent cancellation by the US of the Doha Talks in response to the Taliban's decision not to reopen schools for girls; highlights that any further national talks with the Taliban must include Afghan women representatives;

13. Calls for the EU and its Member States to support and protect those fleeing Afghanistan; reiterates the need to secure the status of Afghan women lawyers, civil society leaders, artists, athletes and other vulnerable people, especially those whose lives are at risk, such as LGBTQI+ persons; reiterates its call for a special visa programme, enhanced resettlement schemes and effective guaranteed protection for Afghan refugees;

14. Stresses the importance of addressing the problem of gender-based violence faced by Afghan women and girls in host countries, particularly in Iran and Pakistan, as well as ensuring that they attend school, participate in the labour market and have access to health services, including mental health services; recalls that refugees and those in transit are particularly at risk of experiencing gender-based violence; calls therefore for greater funding for humanitarian organisations and agencies carrying out protection work;

15. Calls on countries to immediately stop returning individuals to Afghanistan or third countries where they may be at risk of being returned to Afghanistan; calls for close monitoring of Afghan nationals who have already have been returned, in particular children;

16. Condemns the growing number of reports of killings, harassment and intimidation of ethnic and religious minorities;

17. Is deeply concerned that the Taliban is once again providing a safe haven to terrorist groups; insists that the Taliban and the de facto authorities of Afghanistan must fulfil their counterterrorism commitments;

18. Recalls its instruction to the European External Action Service (EEAS) to convey to Pakistan's leadership that it bears responsibility for security and stability in Afghanistan and that it must use its influence on the Taliban to achieve those aims, including ensuring fundamental human rights for Afghan women and girls;

19. Reaffirms the need for the EU to strengthen cooperation with Central Asian countries and encourage their constructive practical role in settling Afghan refugees; stresses that this cooperation should not undermine the EU's defence of fundamental values and the rule of law;

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20. Emphasises that the liberation of women and girls will remain unachievable as long as the humanitarian catastrophe continues; urges the EU and its Member States to address the drivers of the ongoing humanitarian crisis by making every effort to scale up humanitarian assistance, follow a gender-sensitive approach, restore liquidity and maintain basic social services; calls for the unfreezing of Afghan assets and increased financial support to programmes such as the assistance from the Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), which focuses on basic needs and livelihoods, and the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund; underlines that humanitarian funding should be made accessible through a functioning banking system and provided to credible NGOs and community-based organisations operating in Afghanistan, including local women's organisations, in a flexible manner;

21. Takes note of the re-established minimal presence on the ground of the EU Delegation in Kabul for the purpose of coordinating humanitarian aid and monitoring the humanitarian situation; strongly underlines that this does not constitute recognition of the Taliban regime by the EU;

22. Regrets the fact that, on 31 March 2022, international donors, including the EU and its Member States, pledged only USD 2,44 billion towards the UN's USD 4,4 billion appeal for its 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan to provide humanitarian aid in Afghanistan; urges the Commission to allocate adequate and specific funds towards, and implement, women's rights programmes and projects as part of a comprehensive and long-term commitment to supporting human rights and women's rights in Afghanistan;

23. Insists on the need for unfettered humanitarian access to ensure that funds committed actually reach those affected; encourages the EU and its Member States to review and adjust current measures accordingly; recalls that humanitarian aid must be neutral, impartial, humane and independent and should never be subject to any conditionality; calls on the Council, the Commission and the EEAS to consistently convey the message that the provision of humanitarian assistance is not conditioned upon the Council's five benchmarks for engagement with the Taliban;

24. Calls on the EU and its Member States, in the light of the UN High-level Pledging Event on Supporting the Humanitarian Response in Afghanistan, which was held on 31 March 2022, to take further steps to make humanitarian aid more transparent and effective; considers, therefore, that it is essential to secure access to humanitarian funding through a functional banking system in order to provide funds to reliable NGOs working in the country;

25. Commends the bravery of the girls and women who take part in protests; calls on the EEAS and the Commission to engage with the de facto authorities of Afghanistan to demand the whereabouts of women's rights activists who are believed to have been detained and disappeared and to call for their immediate and unconditional release; demands that the Taliban immediately stop these arbitrary and extrajudicial practices and ensure the freedom of peaceful assembly and expression;

26. Calls on the EU and its Member States to increase their support to women's rights activists in Afghanistan and fully implement the EU Guidelines on human rights defenders, including by ensuring accountability for violations through private and public advocacy on individual cases;

27. Calls for the new Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan to be provided with sufficient funds, expertise and diplomatic backing to fulfil his mandate; calls on the UN Human Rights Council to establish an independent, international commission of inquiry with a multi-year mandate and adequate resources to document, report and collect evidence of violations, including violations of women's rights;

28. Welcomes the launching of the Afghan Women Leaders Forum; calls on the Commission and the EEAS to facilitate the organisation of the first International Conference of Afghan Women in order to have their voices be heard in Afghanistan and internationally, rebuild women's networks and support the work of the Afghan Women Leaders Forum in a more inclusive manner; supports the establishment of the Afghan Exile Online University, with financial support from the EU;

29. Invites Afghan parliamentarians, former government officials and civil society activists, in particular the 2021 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought finalists, to actively engage with the European Parliament's Delegation for relations with Afghanistan, relevant committees and other bodies in an effort to ensure that the EU's policy in support of Afghanistan responds to the needs of the Afghan people;

30. Supports the calls of Afghan civil society, in particular those of the participants of the Afghan Women Days at the European Parliament, to hold the de facto Afghan authorities accountable for previous crimes and to not forget their atrocities;

31. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Members of the Afghan National Assembly, the United Nations Human Rights Council and the Taliban's political office in Doha.