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CANADA

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Joint letter of concern for human security and rights in Afghanistan

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau  
Minister Harjit Sajjan – Defence  
Minister Marc Garneau – Foreign Affairs  
Minister Karina Gould – International Development  
Minister Maryam Monsef - Women and Gender Equality  
Minister Marco Mendicino - Immigration  
Ambassador Bob Rae – Permanent Representative for Canada to the UN-New York  
Ambassador Leslie Norton – Permanent Representative to the UN – Geneva  
Ambassador Jacqueline O'Neill – for Women, Peace and Security

Via email

Dear Prime Minister, Ministers and Ambassadors:

We write as Canadian women civil society leaders and senators, dedicated to the education and rights of girls and women in Afghanistan, concerned with the rapidly deteriorating security and human rights environment in Afghanistan.

Canada's substantial investment in Afghanistan, particularly the ongoing focus on women's rights under the Feminist International Assistance Policy, is to be lauded, and has yielded positive impact. The current security crisis in Afghanistan is a defining test of this Policy, and we urge you to act so that the progress won on the rights of women and girls there is not lost. We ask you to continue engagement with President Biden and his administration to push for an immediate and robust response that addresses the underlying causes of the violence and threats to the lives, dignity and rights of women and girls, and indeed, to all Afghans.

While we welcome the desire of both the US and Canadian governments to support the extrication of Afghans who worked for these governments in roles such as military interpreters, and Canada's recent announcement of its visa pathway for human rights defenders to gain asylum as refugees, millions of Afghans in Afghanistan remain in danger and are unable to access these mechanisms.

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Others cannot, or do not wish to, leave their country. Future peacebuilding, sustainable development and good governance following a political settlement of the current conflict will rely on much needed human capital within Afghanistan. Canada must not abandon these leaders now.

We, the under-signed, are deeply concerned for the population of Afghanistan trapped under the Taliban now or who will come under Taliban rule imminently, if no intervention is taken. An urgent and robust response is needed to alleviate the cause of the current violence, human rights abuses and mass displacement. We welcome the recent news that Canada's Embassy in Kabul is among the 15 diplomatic missions and the NATO representative in Kabul jointly urging the Taliban to halt military offensives across Afghanistan, after a peace meeting in Doha failed to agree on a ceasefire. However, we are deeply concerned that stakeholder governments, including Canada and the United States, are focusing largely on providing support for those who are able to leave the country. This is not a solution to the problem, and the situation is rapidly transforming into a human security crisis that endangers millions of people in Afghanistan and well beyond.

The extent of the killing by the Taliban reported so far suggests that there could be unprecedented levels of loss of life, given the current evidence of widespread and systematic extrajudicial executions, deliberate targeting of civilians including women and children, attacks on women parliamentarians, executions of surrendering soldiers and torture of others, and retaliatory assassinations carried out with the intent to intimidate, terrorize and subdue the population.

The reports of atrocities and abuses committed in Afghanistan, particularly where the Taliban and or allies have seized control, are grave enough in scope and scale to constitute a human rights crisis of disastrous proportions that only threatens to worsen. In areas now controlled by Taliban forces, there are reports of rapes of girls, and edicts were issued demanding that families hand over girls aged 15 and over, and widows up to the age of 45, for forced marriages to Taliban soldiers. Girls' schools and libraries have been systematically burned down by Taliban fighters, as have the homes of those accused of collaborating with the Government or foreigners.

Just as they were under Taliban rule, women are reportedly being forbidden from leaving home unaccompanied, forbidden from working, forced to follow Taliban dress codes, and many have been violently beaten or flogged by members of the Taliban. Taliban members are also looting in areas they take, leading to food insecurity and damage to personal property and infrastructure, and forced displacement of civilians. The destruction of civil service infrastructure in at least 28 provinces means civilians can no longer access public services including schools, hospitals and more. Over 50,000 people -- including many women -- have lost their civil service jobs, not to mention tens of thousands more who can no longer work or run their businesses under Taliban rule.

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The violence has created a surge of internally displaced persons, with numbers rising from the current figure exceeding 270,000. Everyone -- from housewives who cannot read or write to journalists who have criticized the Taliban -- is at risk in Taliban-ruled territory. These people -- every one of them -- deserve protection. Women and girls deserve protection promised in the suite of Women, Peace and Security, beginning with UN Security Council Resolution 1325. We know that you agree: human rights are not a luxury; they are a necessity, made possible by human security. Further, in the promotion of an evacuation based response to the exclusion of ensuring security inside Afghanistan, the international community risks contributing to a refugee crisis in which Afghan asylum seekers will face terrible conditions in their search for safety. To protect human rights on the ground, inside Afghanistan and to prevent loss of life on a massive scale, a robust international security response is needed in Afghanistan now.

With appreciation for what has already been done, we urge immediate action, including:

- Through our Permanent Representatives to the United Nations, Canada as the chair of both the Friends of 1325 and the Friends of Afghanistan, could lead on several initiatives, including:
  - calling for further sanctions against the Taliban, specifically, that more names be listed and that any suspension of travel restrictions meant to facilitate the resumption of peace talks be conditional on meaningful engagement with the process,
  - convening bilateral and multilateral meetings and events beginning now, leading up to and during the UN General Assembly in September, to intensify the focus and expand the scope of attention to the human rights and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan in order to generate rapid and effective interventions responding to the threat of the Taliban destroying rights and democratic participation in Afghanistan.
- Canada could report publicly on the viability of all possible options, ranging from the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces under explicit terms protective of local populations, NATO re-engagement and other alternatives that would function to enforce peace in Afghanistan, as well as consider the option to deploy Canadian Forces and air support to reinforce Canada's investments in human rights and development;
- Prime Minister Trudeau, we respectfully urge you to meet with President Joe Biden to discuss US actions under consideration and in process to halt the Taliban violence and prevent the occupation of Kabul by the Taliban, through air support to the Afghan Forces as well as ongoing tactical logistical and material support to the ANDSF;
- Canada could call for the Government of Pakistan to compel the Taliban to observe an immediate and true ceasefire and return to the negotiating table in Doha, and in meeting with US President Biden, should encourage him to do the same, and to acknowledge the facts demonstrating how Pakistan continues supporting the Taliban.

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- Canada could reprise its leadership for the International Criminal Court and advocate to move forward with the investigation into war crimes and serious human rights abuses in Afghanistan.

As engaged and concerned Canadians, we thank you for your active demonstrations of concern and call upon you, Prime Minister, and your Cabinet, to lead Canada to do everything in its power to prevent the carnage looming over Afghanistan. As the painful lessons of Bosnia and Rwanda have taught us, mass atrocities are never inevitable. There were always opportunities to have acted prior to the blood spilling. There is nothing tentative about the reports coming out of Afghanistan on human rights violations by the Taliban underway. Let's heed those opportunities for action and put our values for human rights into practice.

Prime Minister Trudeau, let's seize this opportunity to demonstrate leadership within the international community when it is most needed. We recognize this complex situation makes it hard to mobilize concerted international action. We also know that the crisis unfolding in Afghanistan, particularly with respect to the human rights of women and girls, is a defining test for Canada's leadership in implementing its feminist foreign policy and international development, and an opportunity to realize the values reflected therein; failure will be measured in human lives.

We join our voices today to call upon each of you to take action on Canadian values and promises.

With a sense of urgency and deep concern, we jointly ask for your immediate attention and look forward to substantive responses to this letter from your Government.

We make these urgent requests with appreciation and respect,

Lauryn Oates and Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan with:  
Senators Marilou McPhedran, Mobina Jaffer, Rosa Galvez, Julie Miville-Dechêne,  
Donna Dasko and Paula Simons;  
Sally Armstrong  
Adeena Niazi, Asma Faizi, Mina Saboor and the Afghan Women's Organization  
Nuzhat Jafri, Alia Hogben, Nina Karachi-Khaled and the Canadian Council of Muslim  
Women