

Norway Spurs Support for Afghanistan—Oslo Conference, UN Security Council

by Ulf Sandmark, *EIR* Stockholm Correspondent

Jan. 28—In a decisive move to break the isolation of the new Taliban-led government and bring back the focus to the urgency to support the nation of Afghanistan, Norway invited representatives of the Taliban to Oslo January 23–25, for meetings with Norwegian authorities, and with representatives of the international community, as well as with other Afghans from a range of fields within civil society. Delegations participated from France, Germany, Italy, the UK, the United States, and the European Union, along with a large delegation from Kabul.

On January 26, Norway, as the monthly rotating chair of the UN Security Council, convened a special United Nations Security Council (UNSC) session on Afghanistan. It was chaired personally by Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, who said in pre-session remarks that he was bringing the Oslo initiative into the UNSC, and he hoped for spurring “international collaboration,” which has been lacking. UN Secretary General António Guterres spoke. A report was provided by video from Kabul, on the Afghanistan emergency by Ms. Deborah Lyons, Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

The nature and importance of the Oslo conference was summed up by Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Anniken Huitfeldt:

The meetings here in Oslo provided a good opportunity for Western countries such as Norway, France, the UK, Italy, Germany and the United States as well as the EU to make clear what they expect of the Taliban. If we are to help the popu-

lation and prevent an even worse humanitarian crisis, we must have dialogue with the *de facto* authorities in the country.

Afghanistan is contending with drought, a pandemic, an economic collapse and the effects of years of conflict. Some 24 million people are experiencing acute food insecurity. According to United Nations estimates, more than half the



Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

To break the isolation of the new Taliban-led government, Norway invited representatives of the Taliban to Oslo for meetings January 23-25 with the Norwegian authorities and international representatives, as well as with other Afghans from a range of fields.

population will be facing famine this winter and 97 % of the population could fall below the poverty line this year. A million children could die of starvation.

The Oslo conference is the first of its kind in the past five months since the August 30 exit of U.S. and NATO forces, and the worsening of the emergency conditions in Afghanistan. An important special ses-



WFP

Like many Afghans, this man has been forced by the current crisis to attempt to sell his personal belongings for money to buy food.

sion of the 57-member-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) took place December 19 in Islamabad, to confer and make commitments for support to Afghanistan. On January 19, the Taliban government, despite extreme constraints of resources, hosted a conference in Kabul, on the Afghanistan national economic emergency, with selected international participation.

There are vital initiatives of food aid, vaccines, fuel and other assistance from individual countries, and extensive work by the World Food Program partnership of 75 agencies, but there is no concerted collaboration among the major powers. In particular, the \$9.5 billion in assets belonging to the nation of Afghanistan remain frozen in the United States and Europe, and conditions for mass death are worsening.

The Oslo deliberations should be the start of “a process” and not a one-time event. That was stated clearly by Jan Egeland, the Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, who participated in the Oslo talks. His personal experience dates back to participating in the 1993 Oslo Accords negotiating process, bringing together the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Israeli government.

The Norwegians were happy with the 15-member Taliban delegation, both for its large number, including at the level of Deputy Ministers, and for its broad representation, as it indicated the interest to seriously discuss many areas. Under the leadership of Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, there were officials from the Ministries of Justice, Home, Health, Educa-

tion, Finance and Economy as well as the Afghanistan bank, Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority, Afghan Red Crescent Society and the person responsible for economic cooperation at the Foreign Ministry. Muttaqi gave a press briefing the second day of the deliberations, calling the talks “successful.” The conference sessions were designed with a different focus each day, for example, on day two, meetings between the Taliban leaders and the U.S. delegation took place.

Day One: Common National Interest

The first day Sunday, January 23, an all-day meeting took place between the Taliban delegation and other Afghans from

a variety of backgrounds. According to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) participants included women leaders, journalists and people working to safeguard human rights and address humanitarian, economic, social and political issues. It was the first time that representatives of Afghan NGOs and other parts of Afghan society have met the Taliban since the Taliban took power in the country last August. For security reasons, such meetings cannot take place in Afghanistan.

Ms. Mahbouba Seraj, Executive Director of Afghan Women Skills Development Center, was one of the Afghan women’s rights activists who had been invited to the meeting directly from Afghanistan. Another representative of the Afghan civil society was Jamila Afghani who had been evacuated to Norway in August 2021, after over 25 years of activism for the education of girls and women. Ms. Seraj stated that she had tried to meet with the Taliban government since they took over and now met them for the first time, face to face: “This was definitely a start that I hope will continue,” she said to the Norwegian daily newspaper, *Verdens Gang (VG)*.

Overall, the discussions were very tough among the Afghans, according to the Norwegian NRK TV commentator on the scene, but it seems that what prevailed was a common aim of promoting the wellbeing of the nation, as seen in the joint statement that was issued. It is titled, “Joint Statement of the One-Day Meeting between the Acting Government of Afghanistan and A Number of Afghan Personalities in the Kingdom of

Norway.” The short, full text states the principle of the common interest:

Today, 23 January 2022, a one-day joint meeting was held between officials of the acting Afghan government and a number of personalities in Oslo, the capital of the Kingdom of Norway.

During the meeting, the participants listened patiently to each others’ opinions and exchanged views on the current situation in the country. They affirmed that Afghanistan is the shared home of all Afghans, and stressed that all Afghans need to work together for the political, economic and security prosperity of the country.

The participants of the meeting recognized that understanding and joint cooperation are the only solutions to all the problems of Afghanistan. All participants, with one voice, declared such meetings to be in the interest of the country.

At the end, the participants thanked Norway for providing such an opportunity.

Day Two: U.S. and Taliban Meet

The second day the U.S. and Taliban had a bilateral meeting. The U.S. representative was Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Thomas West. The U.S. delegation also included Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls and Human Rights, Rina Amiri, and representatives from USAID and the U.S. Treasury Department. West had expressed his gratitude for the Norwegian initiative on Twitter:

Welcome our hosts’ initiative to bring Afghan civil society and Taliban together for dialogue. Civil society leaders are the backbone of healthy and prosperous economies and societies.

A general meeting the same day was held with the participation of special envoys from Germany, France, Italy, the EU, and the UK about humanitarian aid, political issues, education issues and economic issues. Representing the UK was Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Nigel Casey. Norway was represented in these talks by former Ambassador to Pakistan, Kjell-Gunnar Eriksen. A “U.S.-Europe Joint Statement on Afghani-



NRC/Christian Jepsen

Jan Egeland, who represented the Norwegian Refugee Council in the Oslo meetings, is seen here visiting Afghanistan in November 2013. The mission included Nangarhar and Laghman provinces and the capital, Kabul.

stan” was [issued](#) also from this meeting.

Afghanistan Acting Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, came out the second day to meet the press during a pause in the talks, and declared the meeting was a success. The main message, he said, was that “The 40-year war had come to an end and peace has finally arrived in Afghanistan,” the Norwegian daily *VG* reported.

The Foreign Minister underscored that he wants good cooperation with other nations. “We do not want to have war and will not allow our territory to be used for warfare against others,” he said, describing that they had learned a lot. On the question about accepting women in the government, Muttaqi reported:

As of now, we have 15,000 women in our government in the health and education service and have women also in other departments. We look forward to many improvements after the meeting.

In a special [interview](#) with *VG*, Taliban government spokesperson Shafi Azam explained the importance of the just-released national budget:

Now we are working on a huge economic effort to achieve economic stability in the nation. If the international community does not support that or puts on pressure economically, we will have a new wave of emigration—not because of politi-

cal conflict, but because of economic problems.

Day Three: Sanctions Must End

On the third and last day, the Taliban delegates met with two leading NGOs—the Red Cross and the Norwegian Refugee Council. The latter is led by Jan Egeland, who was part of the Norwegian diplomatic team from the period of the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and Palestine, a team very experienced then, and to this day, which remains in the background of Norwegian international peace negotiations.

Egeland reported they had an agreement that the girls in Afghanistan are to have access to schools at all levels, starting after winter, in March, and that provincial leaders would allow that. Also, he said that minorities should be respected, and that aid should be allowed to be distributed with the security of the Taliban.

Egeland was critical of NATO abandoning Afghanistan after 40 years of war. He demanded that the Afghan frozen funds should be released, and that banks be allowed to transfer money. He reported that his organization now cannot even transmit money they had collected abroad to stop the starvation in Afghanistan. He was therefore happy that “the Taliban had had very good discussions with the U.S. about humanitarian aid.”

Jan Egeland underscored to the press outside the conference hotel:

The sanctions hold us back. We cannot save human lives without the ending of the sanctions. It hurts the same people whom NATO used billions of dollars to defend until August.

Egeland said the meetings were the first step in a long process. This was the intention of the Norwegian government and the NGOs in their formulation of targets which could be verified and therefore be subject to repeated meetings. This will ensure that the Oslo meet-



CC/Johnpap

Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council.



CC/News Oresund/Erik Ottosson

Jonas Gahr Støre, Prime Minister of Norway.

ing will become a process and not just one shot.

Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Henrik Thune also had a bilateral meeting with the Taliban delegation. The Norwegian Foreign Minister did not meet the delegation, keeping the talks at the lower diplomatic level, and ensuring that the invitation of the Taliban to Oslo did not represent any diplomatic recognition.

Støre Defends Peace Making

The same day the Oslo meetings ended, and the Taliban delegation flew home, the Prime Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre, was in New York City for the final days of meetings of the UN Security Council, under Norway’s chairmanship until the end of January. Støre told Norwegian TV News that he had noted the Taliban representatives were satisfied with their Oslo meetings with the international community, as there is hunger there and a great risk of a big exodus of refugees.

Støre was then asked what he would like to say to the victims of the 2008 terrorist attack by the Taliban of the Haqqani-network on the Serena Hotel in Kabul, in which a Norwegian journalist was killed, and others wounded. Støre explained he felt a unity with the victims and their relatives. He spoke of how much he was affected by the attack, as he himself was there at the hotel at the time. He made the same point to other

media, including CNN's Christiane Amanpour, while getting out his message widely on the Oslo conference, and the necessity to make peace and save lives.

These media questions were put to Støre in the context of many protests that took place in Norway against the visit of the Taliban to Oslo. The protests came from parts of the conservative opposition, including the former Mayor of Oslo Fabian Stang (H) and the leader of the libertarian party (FrP), Silvi Listhaug, who found it offensive that Norway negotiated with terrorists even paying for bringing in Taliban representatives in a private jet directly from Kabul. Women's and youth groups staged small demonstrations outside the conference hotel and outside the Foreign Ministry. An Afghan exile reported to the police that one of the Taliban delegates was Anas Haqqani, the brother of Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is on the U.S. list of international terrorists, with a reward from the FBI of US\$10 million for anyone who could provide information leading to his arrest. Sirajuddin Haqqani is wanted for the attack on the Serena Hotel, where an American citizen also lost his life. Sirajuddin Haqqani is also accused of responsibility for an attempt to attack Afghan President Hamid Karzai in 2008.

In response, Prime Minister Støre said that it was good that Norway took the role of hosting the Oslo conference, because that 2008 experience only emphasizes that the war is not a road to be continued. Actually, one of Støre's bodyguards at the Serena Hotel back in 2008, was one of the Norwegian Security Police bodyguards for the Taliban delegation in Oslo.

As it is with enemies with whom you have to make peace, the Norwegian experience from the war in Afghanistan certainly contributed to the respect needed to handle the complicated meetings with the Taliban in Oslo.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Anniken Huitfeldt said:

I thank the brave women activists, the human rights defenders, and the other Afghans who took part in the meetings with the Taliban in Oslo. It is important that they sat face to face with the Taliban for the first time since the Taliban took power. They put forward their views on the grave situation facing Afghans, on the rights of women and girls, and on the future of their

country. This dialogue is a start, and I hope it will continue.

The leader of the conservative party in Norway (H), Ine Eriksen Søreide, chair of the Parliament's Committee on Foreign Policy and Defense, as well as former Minister of Defense, and former Foreign Minister, expressed her understanding of the protesters' views, but, she said, she supported the invitation to the Taliban. Her point is that it is necessary to talk to the Taliban to get humanitarian aid into the country. She said Norway has been talking to the Taliban for 14 years and had had delegations from them before. In 2019 Norway was one of the alternative sites for the final negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

UNSC—Unfreeze Afghan Funds

On Jan. 26, the UNSC, under the chairmanship of Norway, with Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre presiding, held a special session to launch the UN Transitional Engagement Framework for Afghanistan (TEF), a renewed mandate for the UN Assistance Mission (UNAMA) to the country. Deborah Lyons, head of UNAMA, announced at the session TEF's new "One UN" approach, for which \$8 billion in funding in 2022 is needed for all purposes—food, health care, infrastructure, education, and all others. She stressed that the inability of banks to operate, and the liquidity crisis in the nation make things impossible. Many ambassadors addressed this, in strong terms.

The process from the Oslo meetings was brought into the UNSC session by the in-person report from Ms. Mahboubia Seraj, Executive Director of the Afghan Women Skills Development Center, who came directly from Norway. Prime Minister Støre, speaking in his national capacity, reported on the meetings in Oslo, and said that it is essential for the Security Council to provide UNAMA with a comprehensive mandate to engage with the Taliban, monitor and report on human rights, and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance and support. In the meeting, many speakers raised the need for monetary liquidity and especially for the release of the frozen Afghan funds.

UN Security Council Discussion

The discussion of the Permanent Representatives in the UN Security Council Meeting of January 26 is summarized in a UN [press release](#).

United Nations: Secretary-General António Guterres described a country on the brink of collapse, amid a 30% contraction of gross domestic product (GDP). “Afghanistan is hanging by a thread,” he said. He urged the global community—and the Council—to provide resources to prevent the country from “spiraling further.” Against that backdrop, he called for a suspension of the rules and conditions that constrain not only Afghanistan’s economy, but the United Nations’ life-saving operations. International funding must be allowed to pay the salaries of public-sector workers, from surgeons and nurses to teachers, sanitation workers and electricians. Welcoming the Council’s adoption in late 2021 of a humanitarian exemption [Resolution 2615, December 22] to the United Nations sanctions regime, he called for the issuance of general licenses covering transactions necessary to all humanitarian activities.

He continued that the global community also needs to jump-start Afghanistan’s economy through increased liquidity, notably by finding ways to free up frozen currency reserves and re-engage Afghanistan’s Central Bank. Recalling that the World Bank’s reconstruction trust fund for Afghanistan transferred \$280 million to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Program. (WFP) in December 2021, he called for the remaining \$1.2 billion to be urgently freed up to help Afghans survive the winter. “Without action, lives will be lost, and despair and extremism will grow,” he emphasized, warning that economic collapse could lead to a massive exodus of people fleeing the country.

United States: Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, acknowledging calls for the release of frozen assets, cited efforts to ensure sanctions do not hamper aid deliveries, saying “The United States is working to ensure sanctions imposed do not impede such activities.” She pointed to the issuance of three general licenses by the United States Treasury, which facilitate the flow of vital assistance, as well as the adoption in December 2021 of Resolution 2615 on humanitarian exemptions to sanctions on the Taliban, introduced by her country.

While the United States is the single largest provider of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, the scale of the crisis demands a global response, she said.



Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN, acknowledged calls for the release of Afghanistan’s frozen assets held by her government, but was not able to report any movement toward their release.

CC/USIP

Stressing that the liquidity crisis is worsening the humanitarian situation, she spoke of the importance of an independent and technically competent Central Bank.

She otherwise verbalized the cynical feint of the U.S. State Department’s stance that, the U.S. “recognizes calls to make available frozen Central Bank reserves, presently under litigation, to help Afghans,” but can’t do anything on that.

Russia: Ambassador Dmitry Polyanskiy said that Afghan authorities have taken positive steps since coming to power, and his delegation expected the Taliban would continue to do so when tackling illicit drugs and respecting human rights. Yet, in the absence of the necessary resources, the new authorities will be unable to address these problems, with success depending on comprehensive assistance provided by the international community. He expressed hope the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2615 (2021) would step up aid deliveries.

However, these efforts are insufficient, representing a “drop in the ocean” in the face of such challenges as a fragile banking system and frozen assets. He said, “We call on the United States and other Western donors to get the money back to the country. The money belongs to the Afghan people and cannot be used for bargaining or as a tool to punish the Afghans for the new reality that has evolved in their country.” The

consequences of allowing the nation to collapse will “spread terrorist activity, boost drug production and, as a result, lead to even greater instability both in the region and beyond.”

China: Ambassador Zhang Jun said that while this is the first war-free winter in Afghanistan in decades, the economy is in free fall and the population is facing an unfolding nightmare following the hasty withdrawal of foreign troops last summer. Regrettably, there has been no improvement in humanitarian aid delivery since the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2615 (2021), proving that the issue is not one of obstruction, but of politicization, as some parties seek to use aid as a bargaining chip. “This is morally unacceptable and strategically short-sighted and dangerous,” he stressed. Noting that unilateral coercive measures have frozen more than \$9 billion and severely hindered Afghanistan’s access to financing, he urged the international community to explore further options for injections of liquidity and called for the lifting of all unilateral sanctions.

Engagement with the Taliban leadership should be enhanced in a rational and pragmatic manner, as exemplified in Norway’s recent dialogue initiative. Emphasizing that only terrorist groups will benefit from the humanitarian crisis, he advocated for a stronger sense of urgency and the abandonment of politicized approaches, while outlining China’s ongoing support to the Afghan people.

India: Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti said his country’s special relationship with the Afghan people and the guidance outlined in Resolution 2593 (2021) will continue to steer its approach to Afghanistan. Under-scoring India’s “steadfast” commitment to humanitarian assistance, he highlighted the provision of 50,000 metric tons of wheat and life-saving medicines, and 1 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the country. Noting that aid should be based on the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, and disbursed in a non-discriminatory, fully accessible manner to all, reaching the most vulnerable groups first, he said that, as Afghanistan’s largest regional development partner, India is ready to coordinate with other stakeholders to enable expeditious aid provision.

Uzbekistan: Ambassador Bakhtiyor Ibragimov said his country is linked to Afghanistan by centuries-old bonds of friendship, shared history, religion, customs, and traditions. Underlining the need to maintain

dialogue with the new authorities to encourage them to honor their promises, including the forming of an inclusive government and ensuring human rights, he highlighted Uzbekistan’s provision of food, clothes and coal to the country and proposal to establish under United Nations auspices a “multi-functional hub” in the border city of Termez, which is linked to Afghanistan by an airport, railway, highways, and a large logistics terminal. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has already welcomed this initiative.

Amb. Ibragimov called for lifting unilateral sanctions and encouraged more active participation by international institutions in financing infrastructural projects, noting that Uzbekistan is ready to join Afghanistan in building the Surkhan–Pule-Khumri power line and Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar [railway](#). Stressing that Afghanistan should never again be used as a safe haven for terrorist groups, he said the new authorities in Kabul have given assurances to Uzbekistan that Afghanistan will never again pose a threat to its immediate neighbors or to any other third country.

Pakistan: Ambassador Munir Akram said that the January 26 debate would have been more interactive and productive if the Council had also listened to a representative of Afghanistan’s interim Government. Citing the impact of the country’s still-frozen assets, he said that without urgent humanitarian assistance, chaos and conflict could return alongside a massive outflux of refugees. Noting that Resolution 2615 reaffirms that targeted sanctions should not be used to prevent economic or development assistance, he called for the release of WFP’s remaining funds, adding that there is no legal justification for depriving Afghans of their reserves.

For its part, Pakistan has provided \$30 million in food and other assistance, established land and air bridges, opened all its borders, and is currently supporting nearly four million Afghan refugees. The OIC, at its December meeting in Pakistan, agreed to establish a Humanitarian Trust Fund for Afghanistan and aims to revive the Afghan banking system. He called on the international community to engage with the Taliban in order to develop appropriate modalities for cooperative counter-terrorism action, adding that the new UNAMA (UN Assistance Mission) mandate should enjoy support from the interim government and respect Afghanistan’s sovereignty.