

Remarks by Ms. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, United Nations Under-Secretary General and Executive Director, UN-Habitat

Opening of the Urban Symposium

Sunday 21 July 2019 at the Presidential Palace, Afghanistan

Bismi Allahi Rahman Rahim
Your Excellency the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Mr Mohamad Ashraf Ghani
Honorable Ministers, Mayors,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalawualaikum

I am very honoured and delighted to visit the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on the occasion of the first International Symposium on Urban Informality and Upgrading, held in the beautiful city of Kabul.

I would like to thank President Ashraf Ghani and Minister Peikar for their invitation and wonderful hospitality. This visit is very special to me as it is my first time, as Executive Director of UN-Habitat, in Afghanistan. My visit also coincides with that of the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General and my counterpart Under-Secretary Generals; a strong demonstration of the One UN spirit.

Mr President, Honorable Ministers,

Afghanistan is the most important country programme for UN-Habitat worldwide with more than 1,500 staff deployed across many Afghan cities. For more than two decades, UN-Habitat has been a strategic partner of the people and institutions of Afghanistan both in urban and rural areas. The National Solidarity Programme, designed by H.E the President, as well as the Citizens' Charter Programme, are examples of the fruits of this partnership.

We can be proud of the People's Process, which is a tested and working model of community-driven development approach. We can see the tangible results where human and social development positively transforms peoples' lives, upgrading communities and empowering women. Today 50 per cent of the community development councils are made up of women, and this has enabled an inclusive urbanization process leaving no one behind.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the last two decades, UN-Habitat and the people of Afghanistan have evolved a model of sustainable urbanisation generating prosperity, jobs and peace. Here I would like to congratulate H.E. President Ashraf Ghani for his vision placing urbanization at the heart of the country's development policies.

We take note that the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, the country's roadmap to achieve development, peace and self-reliance gives importance to sustainable urbanization. This is delivered through the Urban National Priority Programme.

President Ghani understands very well that there is no development without sustainable urbanization and that there is no sustainable urbanization without development. This policy opens up immense opportunity for socio-economic growth, improved stability and decent living standards for its population.

Having just come from the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York, I can see that Afghanistan can be a role model in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, the UN roadmap to achieve sustainable development in cities.

Afghan cities, as you know, are already accounting for more than 50% of the national GDP although only a quarter of the population is living in urban areas today. Having come from a rural village and being a beneficiary of a national land reform programme in Malaysia, I can assure you that urbanisation can work for everyone.

At the UN-Habitat Assembly where I received the delegation from Afghanistan, I explained that the focus on urbanisation does not mean forgetting rural areas. We see both as part of one system. What is clear is that we need to get urbanisation right to ensure development is sustainable and does not leave anyone behind.

I would like to acknowledge the Government's positive efforts in revising Land Management Law and the regulation on the registration of informal settlements. I would also like to appreciate the decree on the identification and allocation of state land to Internally Displaced Persons and returning refugees. The housing policy and the upgrading policy are some of the examples of the recent achievements.

Mr President

Congratulations for these urban reforms that will bring positive social, economic, physical and environmental changes to cities and people. UN-Habitat is extremely honoured to work very closely with the Ministry of Urban Development and Land, the Deputy Ministry for Municipalities, and Kabul Municipality in the implementation of these urban reforms.

Going forward our partnership will require even stronger engagement of donors and other development partners who are keen to invest in the urban sector. In my time as a mayor, I know that the urban sector can only attract investments if we address challenges arising from rapid urbanization.

To ensure that we address urban poverty and inequality, I urge you to consider broader and more sustained urban partnerships to address the needs of people in cities. The future of Afghanistan is urban and it is crucial to invest in people and cities today to bring about multi-generational impact and prosperity for the years to come.

Distributing Occupancy Certificates' to residents of informal areas is a strong result of this strategic vision improving the lives of millions, especially women. This is indeed the

largest land programme in the world and we are honoured to support the institutions and the people of Afghanistan.

Once again, Mr President, Ministers and Mayors, on behalf of UN-Habitat and all of our UN family, congratulations and thank you very much for hosting me in Afghanistan.