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Madam President, Excellencies, Dear Colleagues,

Like others, I would like to thank Representative Yamamoto for his speech and for his admirable commitment to lasting peace in Afghanistan. I would also like to thank Ms Storai Tapes for her briefing and her work to promote women's rights in Afghanistan.

Ms President, I would like to stress three points: (1) the peace process; (2) the elections; and (3) the importance of promoting and protecting human rights in Afghanistan.

Firstly, **the consultations to establish a peace process**. Belgium hopes that this year will see a decisive breakthrough for a negotiated settlement to a long and devastating conflict in Afghanistan. We believe that a sustainable peace agreement can only be reached through global and inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue. I would like to reiterate our support for the Kabul process, which must form the basis of a peace process led and controlled by the Afghans and whose second phase must be supported by the entire international community.

Belgium also calls on all the parties to promote the **equal and meaningful participation of women** in every stage of the peace process. Any agreement must guarantee the protection and promotion of women's rights in accordance with the Afghan Constitution. It would be very unfair if women had to pay the price of peace.

Madam President,

2019 is also a crucial year for the **consolidation of democracy** in Afghanistan - and this is my second point. Afghanistan needs a representative legislature if it is to face future challenges. It is therefore essential for the results of the legislative elections to be finalised. Belgium stresses the need to **learn lessons** from last year's vote and implement the required electoral reforms. We also call on all the political players to act responsibly and ensure that the next presidential and other elections are free, transparent and credible.

I now come to my third point, the **human rights situation** in Afghanistan. Belgium is extremely concerned by the impact of the armed conflict on the civilian population. The UNAMA report on the protection of civilians notes a record number of civilian deaths, including many women and children. Belgium asks all the parties to take effective measures to prevent and put an end to all grave violations against children, including those caused by aerial bombings and the use of explosives in inhabited areas;

Of particular concern is the report that anti-government elements are increasingly targeting civilians, often with improvised explosive devices. The trend of more violent and deliberate attacks against healthcare institutions and schools has continued and is unacceptable. **All parties must respect international humanitarian law.**

As you know, Belgium attaches particular importance to the **role of women** in peace-building. In keeping with its 2 million euro contribution to supporting the work of UN WOMEN in implementing Afghanistan's National Action Plan on Resolution 1325 during last November's Geneva Conference, Belgium welcomes the measures taken by the Government to protect women's rights. These measures have resulted in increased participation in public services and decision-making at local level. [In this respect, we paid close attention to the recommendations of Ms Storai Tapesh]. We encourage the additional work to protect women who defend human rights and to increase access to education for women and girls so that they can participate fully in social, economic and political life.

Madam President,

Allow me to conclude by paying tribute to the victims of the violence in Afghanistan and the resilience of the Afghan people and security forces. The objective of peace is achievable in Afghanistan. Belgium supports a peaceful settlement that is led and controlled by the Afghans.

Thank you, Madam President.