

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

31 August 2021

Appointment of UN Special Envoys / Situation in Afghanistan

**Opening Statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence,
Simon Coveney T.D.**

Chair, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to meet today. Developments in Afghanistan in recent weeks have shocked the world, and with good reason. I welcome the opportunity to update the Committee today, including on the recent mission of our diplomatic and military team there, as well as on active discussions at international level on the crisis, in the context of Ireland's forthcoming Presidency of the UN Security Council.

I am also pleased to have the opportunity to address this Committee on the issue of Special Envoys, and to clarify any questions that arise.

Special Envoys have been deployed by my Department and by the Government over many years to advance specific government priorities. The duration, tasking and support provided has varied in accordance with the nature of the role.

Ireland is not an outlier in this regard. EU partners and like-minded states such as the US and Canada also deploy Special Envoys to highlight and build networks of influence on thematic priorities or to deepen engagement in particular geographic regions. The Committee will be aware, for example, that

US Special Envoys to Northern Ireland have played a particularly important role in contributing to the peace process on this island.

Ireland currently has two Special Envoys: **Mr. Tom Arnold** is serving as **Government Special Envoy on Food Systems**, a role that was jointly proposed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, linked to preparations for the UN Food Systems Summit next month [23 September 2021] and the Nutrition 4 Growth Summit in December 2021. **Mr. Kenneth Thompson** is serving as **Special Envoy for francophone Africa and the Sahel**, a role linked to Ireland's term on the Security Council. It is of great value and importance in a region that features prominently on the Council agenda and where Ireland does not yet have an Embassy network.

I also wish to recall the contribution made by a number of **time-limited Special Envoys deployed by the Government** in the course of Ireland's campaign for membership of the Security Council. These envoys, who were mainly serving or recently retired Irish diplomats, engaged with and travelled to a wide range of countries and regions to promote Ireland's candidacy, particularly to countries where Ireland does not have an Embassy or established diplomatic relations.

They also undertook meetings at the UN, the African Union and other international and regional organisations. I have no doubt that the sustained engagement by these Envoys was critical to a successful outcome for Ireland in what was a very competitive campaign.

I would like to acknowledge also the **work of former Minister Zappone as a Special Envoy for the Security Council campaign**, while a serving Minister. The decision to appoint her in September 2019 was taken in order to bolster Ireland's profile in the final months of the campaign. During her nine months

in this role, Ms Zappone led twenty-five bilateral meetings in which our candidature was raised, mainly with countries where we do not have Embassies on the ground. These meetings took place in the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2019, at the International Conference on Population and Development in Nairobi in November 2019 and in parallel with official engagements in New York in March 2020.

Katherine Zappone stepped down and left politics last summer. She moved to live full time in New York. She reached out to me last summer and in a brief conversation mentioned that she would be available to help in any way she could in our work at the UN.

Katherine Zappone and I spoke now and again as former colleagues do. I remember for example speaking to her the morning of the US Presidential election result.

In February of this year we spoke and Katherine Zappone told me of work she was doing in the UN system. At no point in that conversation did I consider that she was lobbying me for a job. Following on from that conversation however, I reflected on the fact that Katherine Zappone was a former Irish Minister, had been heavily involved in our Security Council campaign, had campaigned all her life on issues of equality and was now living in New York. Late in February I met with my Secretary General to review our first months on the Security Council. At the end of that meeting I asked him for his view on whether Katherine Zappone could be of any use to our team in New York. He told me he would reflect on it.

As members of the Committee will be aware, we are currently seeing an increasingly polarised debate on human rights internationally, and even within

the EU. There is significant push back against the very definition of human rights by certain States. As a result, many States that would share Ireland's approach to human rights have appointed Special Envoys with mandates in this area.

In light of this, officials in my Department recommended a role with a broad mandate, focussing on freedom of expression. The Department believed this would provide enhanced capacity for high-level engagement on established Irish human rights priorities, including the human rights of LGBTI+ persons, civil society space, freedom of the media and freedom of association.

I approached Katherine Zappone and asked if she'd be interested in taking this role in principle. She said she would and I handed the process back to my Secretary General. I was not involved at any point in discussions around terms and conditions, which isn't unusual.

Chair,

As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I made the decision to ask Katherine Zappone if she would consider the role of special envoy. That was on the basis of my Department's view that there was a substantive body of work to do to advance Ireland's priorities in the areas of freedom of opinion and expression.

Turning now to the situation in Afghanistan, since capturing Kabul on 15 August, the Taliban has sought to communicate an image of moderation, promising amnesty to former rivals, peace and rights for women - "within the limits of Islam" which they have not defined - and calling for recognition from the international community. However, the scenes of panic at Kabul airport demonstrate the scepticism of most Afghans, especially urban women and those

raised since the previous Taliban administration was forced out of office in 2001. This also reflects the violence perpetrated by the Taliban in recent months as they retook territory outside the capital.

Ireland's approach to Afghanistan has been consistently clear. We have called for an end to the violence and for negotiations between all parties to reach a negotiated political settlement. We have called for the Taliban to work with others to build a peaceful and inclusive transition government that serves all Afghans. Any future Afghan administration must protect civilians and fulfil Afghanistan's obligations under international law. Human rights, especially for Afghan women and girls and minorities must be respected, protected and upheld. Afghanistan must never again become a haven for international terrorism. All foreign nationals and those Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan, including those to whom Ireland has offered resettlement, should not be hindered in doing so. The Taliban must guarantee safe access for humanitarian aid and those providing vital and life-saving assistance to the Afghan people.

These are the principles that are guiding Ireland during our Presidency of the Security Council on Afghanistan. The Security Council discussed the situation in Afghanistan in emergency session on 16 August. Ireland also joined with 96 other states in a statement on 29 August, reminding the Taliban of their assurances to provide safe passage to those who wish to leave Afghanistan. Afghanistan must never again become a safe haven for international terrorists. Last night, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2593 which reaffirms the importance of human rights, humanitarian assistance and the need to allow safe passage. The Security Council is also scheduled to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and the UN Assistance Mission in the country (UNAMA) on 9 September. Afghanistan will also be a key focus of an informal meeting of EU

Foreign Ministers – the so-called “Gymnich” meeting - later this week in Slovenia.

Chair,

The rapid takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban led to the rapid evacuation efforts at Hamad Karzai International Airport (HKIA) - which became one of the most complex operations of its kind ever managed by the international community.

My Department and the Embassy of Ireland in Abu Dhabi has been providing consular assistance and advice to Irish citizens wishing to leave Afghanistan since mid-August. Close cooperation and coordination on the evacuation process through Hamad Karzai International Airport was also ongoing with EU Member States, the UK, the US and other partners. Ten Irish citizens were successfully evacuated between 17 and 22 August.

It became clear, however, that it was increasingly complex for family groups to gain access to the airport. On the recommendation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Defence, and taking into consideration the security advice and a threat assessment from the Defence Forces, I approved the deployment of an Emergency Civil Assistance Team, or ECAT, on the evening of Monday 23 August.

The ECAT team comprised two officials from my Department and nine members of the Defence Forces. The ECAT deployed in the early hours of Tuesday 24 August, with the support of the French Armed Forces. This was a short-term support to the consular response to the situation in Afghanistan.

The goal of the ECAT Mission was to provide consular advice and assistance, including by assisting in the safe evacuation of the Irish citizens and dependants that had been identified. The ECAT mission remained in the environs of the airport at all stages of the mission.

With the support of ECAT, 26 Irish citizens, family members and residents were successfully supported to evacuate Afghanistan.

I wish at this point to sincerely thank the ECAT team for their efforts in such a challenging and complex environment, and all those who have supported the overall consular response. I also would like to thank sincerely our international partners for their assistance.

I know there are many in Ireland today with deep concerns for family members, friends and colleagues who remain in Afghanistan. I can give full assurance that the overall consular effort is continuing and we remain strongly committed to assisting those requiring ongoing consular support in Afghanistan.

We are liaising with partners, including those who have a presence on the ground, to advise on safe options for remaining Irish citizens and dependants who wish to do so to leave the country in the period ahead. We will also continue to provide guidance to people who have a right to Irish residency who are in Afghanistan.

Ireland has also offered resettlement to approximately 270 vulnerable Afghans including human rights defenders, those working to protect rights of women and girls, and those working with NGOs and international organisations. The Department of Justice is also working to facilitate family reunification visas.

We support a recent call on the international community by the President of the European Commission to support the many Afghans displaced in recent months in neighbouring countries.

In the same spirit, Ireland signed up to a joint statement with a number of countries on Sunday with regard to travel assurances from the Taliban on evacuation. It is our sincere hope that all foreign nationals and all Afghan citizens with travel authorisation from another country, including Ireland, will be allowed to proceed in a safe and orderly manner to points of departure and travel outside the country. We will carefully monitor the situation on the ground in the coming days and weeks, and work with other Government Departments, in particular the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and the Department of Justice. I would like to put on record my appreciation for the excellent cooperation and flexibility we have witnessed in recent weeks from those Departments.