

Geneva Peace Week 2021

**Concluding remarks by
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Dear Colleagues, Friends and Fellow Peacebuilders – in Geneva and online,

On behalf of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform Partnership; the Geneva Centre for Security Policy; the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance; Interpeace, the Quaker United Nations Office; and the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding at the Graduate Institute, I am delighted to share concluding remarks on the 2021 Geneva Peace Week with you this afternoon.

I wish I could have joined you in person, but instead I am with you in the same way as many Geneva Peace Week 2021 participants, through this online platform. Greetings from Vienna to Geneva!

Colleagues, Friends, the current geopolitical context is of great concern. While the world's geopolitical environment has rarely been really stable, the volatility we see today is particularly complex and unpredictable. Peace is fragile at best and absent in too many parts of the world.

On 15 August of this year the Taliban entered Kabul and took charge of 39 million Afghans, including 19 million women and girls. 19 million! That is about the same number of people, both male *and* female, living in the Scandinavian countries combined.

Overnight, several of the most basic human rights were denied to these 19 million Afghan women and girls – the right to life and liberty, to freedom from slavery and torture, to freedom of opinion and expression, to work, and to education. These inherent human rights are no longer respected for Afghan women and girls.

Much is and will continue to be analysed about what went wrong in Afghanistan. Many factors came into play, not least the strong focus on counter-insurgency at the outset of the so-called war on terror after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Having said that, this is not the only problem. An important part of the Afghan population have not been drawn into the nation-building process, which proves that a non-inclusive process has limited chances of success.

The peace process has been seriously flawed, national ownership was fragile, there were serious obstacles to involving women in meaningful ways, and many Afghan regions failed to move beyond efforts to achieve basic stability. What I felt was particularly sobering is to acknowledge the limits of what can be done by external actors in an admittedly very challenging environment. Let's face it: these are challenges that we witness not only in Afghanistan, but also in many other fragile contexts where peacebuilding takes place. So I would suggest that Afghanistan was a kind of an alarm clock that woke us up to some hard, unpalatable realities.

Now, after what we have focused on this past week, how can we do better?

How is peace really built? What type of peace is desired by the entire population living in a community, a country and a region?

It has never been more important to respect the do-no-harm principle than now, not just with regard to the immediate implications for peacebuilding efforts, but also for the long term.

Peace: for whom and by whom?

What type of national ownership do we need? Clearly peacebuilding needs to be owned by – or rather serve – everyone: men, women, boys and girls.

So the events of 15 August have indeed challenged all of us to reflect deeply and critically on what we do as peacebuilders, whether we seek to contribute to building peace in a place far from one's own, or whether we are a peacebuilder active in our own country.

Colleagues, it has been an intensive and productive week. You have generated a variety of findings and recommendations, ranging from the strategic to the specific. They have already been referred to and discussed in a previous session, so I will not try to duplicate this effort here.

However, I will recall what we set out to do during the week, as was highlighted on Monday.

With a focus on moving “From seeds to systems of peace: Weathering today's challenges”, our objectives have been threefold.

Firstly, there is an urgent need to nurture and build trust in times of turbulence, fragmentation and uncertainty.

In addition to the wakeup call of Afghanistan, the world has experienced 20 months of pandemic isolation and turbulence. In their wake, disconnects, gaps and vulnerabilities have been revealed across and between communities, countries and continents.

Reconnecting and revitalising both our interpersonal relationships and interinstitutional cooperation are critical as we seek to move the sustainable peace agenda forward. In light of this need, the vibrant face-to-face and online engagement that happened throughout Geneva Peace Week is an encouraging sign.

Our second aim this week was to provide a platform, a space, for exchanging ideas about how to best build peace in the face of today's extraordinary and complex challenges.

What are the seeds for peace, and how do we transform them into systems for establishing sustainable peace on the ground? Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs Ignazio Cassis drew our attention to the role and relevance of innovation and the constructive potential of the digital and technical dimensions of peacebuilding.

This and other tracks have produced many seeds for peace: new ways of thinking, new initiatives, and new methodologies have been shared, explored and developed.

Now the question arises, how do we transform these seeds into working, properly functioning systems? This takes me to the third of the week's objectives.

To turn seeds of peace into peace-generating systems we need effective and ethical leadership. Leadership starts with every single one of us – at all levels. It requires forward-leaning and adaptive people who are prepared to play a leadership role at whatever level such a role is needed.

I would suggest several principles to guide adaptive leadership for peacebuilding:

- The ability to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity;
- The ability to encourage innovation and experimentation;
- The willingness to prioritise self-reflection and life-long learning; and, finally,
- The ability to achieve positive outcomes by creating win-win solutions.

In times of distrust and disagreements, exercising leadership means having the courage to engage with those who are not like-minded and who do not have the same histories, cultures and perceptions as we do.

Let me conclude by saying that I believe we all agree that we need to move from negative peace to positive peace, from polarisation and confrontation to dialogue, and from an over-reliance on deterrence to putting our trust in cooperative security.

On behalf of the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform Partners I would like to thank all of you for your active participation and the many insightful contributions you made throughout the week.

Special thanks must go to the United Nations Office in Geneva and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the key co-organisers of the Geneva Peace Week.

And finally, last but not least, on behalf of *all* of us, I would like to express my gratitude to the outstanding, truly innovative and creative 2021 Geneva Peace Week Team led by Rainer Gude with Danson Gichini and Annika Ericson-Pearson, as the powerful driving forces behind this successful endeavour. You and the larger Geneva Peace Week Team have taken Geneva Peace Week to new heights! Thank you.

And to all of you, a warm welcome back next year!