

Mr President, Esteemed Members of the Security Council,

We meet amidst intense focus on ensuring that Afghanistan's three complex and intertwined transition processes - political, security and economic – are on track.

These efforts are due to culminate in 2014 but the fundamentals are to be put in place this year.

The very core of transition is strengthening Afghan national ownership and leadership. The onus for driving progress is thus on the Government of Afghanistan and the country's leading political forces.

There is however a clear need to sustained and predictable international support, through 2014 and beyond in ways that reinforce Afghanistan's leadership.

Mr. President,

As announced this week, Afghan security forces have entered the last phase in assuming the lead responsibility for security throughout the country. Anti-Government elements are however seeking to counter this by targeting security personnel and by terrorising civilians. They aim to shake the population's confidence in the Government and its armed forces.

We see increasingly brutal complex assaults on high-profile targets, high on civilian casualties, low on reaching military objectives, but nevertheless garnering media support. Targeted killings of those deemed supportive of the Government includes civil servants and judicial workers in violation of international law and the norms of war. In population centres attacks in public spaces demonstrate a complete disregard for civilian lives.

Afghan security forces fight bravely and bear the brunt of losses, show increased courage, confidence and competence in countering the intentions of the anti-Government forces.

At the same time, the Afghan forces, notably the National Army, urgently require critical enablers such as air capacity to ensure their effectiveness and the sustainability. It is for the international community to assist.

Mr. President,

A smooth and legitimate transfer of power is widely acknowledged as the most critical part of transition, underpinning all other efforts. President Karzai continues to reiterate his commitment to standing aside in accordance with the Constitution. Planning and positioning ahead of the polls, scheduled for 5 April 2014, dominates the political landscape.

Although I see progress in many technical areas, I am concerned by continued delays in the passage of the two major pieces of electoral legislation. For orderly and timely preparations for the polls promulgation is necessary before the summer recess of the National Assembly. It will require compromise and goodwill on all sides, notably proactive engagement of the government.

The continuous lack of progress in this critical area has already raised questions in some minds about the intention to hold elections in a timely and acceptable manner.

An increased focus on a broad national accord with regard to electoral platforms and possible presidential candidates is legitimate and even advisable. However, this must not be at the expense of electoral preparations. And it cannot and should not be a substitute for credible elections. There is no alternative to inclusive and transparent elections as a means of delivering political transition with the necessary degree of legitimacy and acceptability. The elections are central to international and domestic legitimacy and sustained extraordinary support of the international community for the new government.

Mr. President,

Peace is the Afghan people's the greatest desire.

Political efforts centred on establishing a Taliban office in Doha for the purpose of talks between the Afghan High Peace Council and authorised representatives of the Taliban to promote peace and reconciliation led to contradictory development and announcement this week. We hope that the current controversies and legitimate concerns around the Taliban office in Doha will soon be resolved thus opening the way to direct peace and reconciliation discussions between the High Peace Council and the Taliban. We also hope that it will be accompanied by a reduction of violence and civilian casualties. UNAMA stands ready to support all peace and reconciliation efforts based on and full conformity with its mandate. Among others it stands ready to facilitate an inter-Afghan Track II dialogue as well as to engage with the Taliban on issues related to the promotion of human rights, application of humanitarian law and reduction of civilian casualties

Promotion of peace and reconciliation requires an enabling regional environment.

Recent developments between Afghanistan and Pakistan as noted in the Secretary General's report are of concern. Such tensions are unfortunate and dangerous, especially at this stage of Afghanistan's development. They bring in additional elements of risks to an already complex and complicated political and security situation in Afghanistan and in the region. It is for the two countries to address these concerns and problems and their underlying reasons, to build trust and

to refrain from any step that could contribute to an escalation of tensions and inflamed public sentiments. The two neighbouring countries share common concerns and interests in fighting terrorism. They can succeed or fail together.

I am encouraged by the positive exchanges following the recent Pakistani elections between President Karzai and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif as well as by the resumption of high-level military contacts between the two countries with the participation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Mr. President,

A major conference in Kabul next month will assess progress on the mutual commitments to Government reform and international civilian assistance made one year ago in Tokyo. Frank discussion between the Government of Afghanistan and its international partners must result in a reinvigorated agenda for action in the coming year.

Among the hard deliverables are not only issues of economic development and good governance, but, at this juncture of the transition, issues related to elections and human rights. They address fundamental building blocks of the Afghan State.

This week's appointment of new human rights commissioners to the AIHRC saw concerns at whether the appointment process complied with international principles and standards and met Afghan legal requirements of transparency, broad consultations and selection of independent qualified individuals. These concerns are currently under review by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva and will be further reviewed by the respective international accreditation body for such national human rights institutions. In the meantime the work of the Commission will be under increased scrutiny.

Implementation of the law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, in protecting and promoting the rights of Afghan women and girls, and gains made by them over the last decade, is another central obligation.

Women's equal and meaningful participation in economic, political and public life is Constitutionally guaranteed in Afghanistan and globally recognised as central to improving social development, including the health and well-being of children – the future of any nation. Key international donors are clear that any erosion of such commitments including erosion of the the Elimination of Violence Against Women law and its implementation would have a direct, negative impact on future international assistance.

Mr. President,

Afghanistan's already acutely low humanitarian indicators are put further at risk by shrinking humanitarian space. But humanitarian response alone will not suffice and greater attention and priority must be afforded to durable solutions and Government capacity. This includes a greater

development focus on disaster management systems, internally displaced persons and refugees, their strictly voluntary return and sustainable livelihoods, and sustaining the access and quality of the health system.

Mr. President,

This is a critical juncture. The trajectory is irreversible but we need to work together – the Afghan authorities, the Afghan people and international partners - in ensuring it is sustainable.

There are results to report. But setbacks appear and are and will be inevitable.

The need is for predictability and confidence. Determined internal and external efforts are required to prove that worse case scenarios are wrong. This is challenging but possible.

Thank you for your attention