



Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Mr. Tadamichi Yamamoto

[as delivered]

New York, 11 March 2019

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Thank you very much Madam President.

Before I start my remarks on Afghanistan may I be allowed to express my sincere condolences and sympathy for the loss of many lives including the UN colleagues in the accident of the Ethiopian Airlines.

Madam President,

Now I'd like to turn to the issue of Afghanistan.

The last three months have seen significant developments on both peace and elections.

First on peace. Further efforts have been made to bring an end to the decades-long conflict in Afghanistan, yielding tangible progress.

The United States and the Taliban have continued to engage in intensive direct talks. A number of countries have extended support to facilitate these talks. In the International Contact Group meeting held in London in late January, participants welcomed the ongoing US-Taliban talks and expressed hope that this would enable direct talks to take place between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. In early February, there was a meeting between some Afghan representatives and the Taliban in Moscow, which provided an opportunity for them to have a better understanding of each other's views and thinking on peace. Despite such engagements, the Taliban have not yet accepted to engage in direct talks with the Government. I stress the imperative need for the Taliban to directly talk with the Government.

The peace process is about determining the future of the country and its people. The centrality of Afghanistan in the peace process is imperative, and the process must be owned by its people including women. It is necessary that substantive talks on peace take place between the Government representing a cross-section of the population and the Taliban. Inclusiveness, coherence, and representativeness in negotiations are critical for success. We understand that the Government is consulting widely to forge the negotiating structure, including a negotiating team, which enables such inclusiveness with coherence. Establishment of such a negotiating team is critical to moving the process of peace further. Yesterday a presidential decree was issued for the holding of a Peace Consultative Jirga, a traditional assembly of leaders, in late April. We hope, that this will help create a national consensus on peace through an inclusive process.

Amid these efforts for peace, we must recognize that all international efforts, including regional efforts, need to come together to support an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. In order for the process of peace and the implementation of an agreement to be sustainable, support and cooperation of the international community, particularly regional countries, is essential. The United Nations welcomes various efforts and initiatives undertaken by countries concerned, but stress the need for all those constructive efforts to be in concert and aligned in support of Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace efforts as agreed in Geneva last November. In this context, we understand that the Government of Afghanistan has proposed to hold the third meeting of the Kabul Process on Peace.



Madam President,

In working towards peace, we must acknowledge the profound and legitimate concerns of many citizens regarding possible compromises on the gains made over the past 18 years in the name of peace. The United Nations shares many of these concerns, particularly regarding the fate of women's rights, freedom of expression including media rights, and space for civil society to function effectively, all of which must be protected under a peace agreement. To address these effectively, the peace process must be inclusive of the meaningful participation of groups representing all segments of Afghanistan's diverse society including women, youths, ulemas, and community and political leaders. We need to think also of the rights of the victims and the issues of transitional justice.

In particular, we must strongly support and advocate for the perspectives of Afghan women, who are expressing a clear determination to safeguard their hard-won civil, political, and economic rights under any peace agreement. I commend the Government of Afghanistan for its commitment to women's participation. Building on these steps, we must ensure that women's representation is strengthened and diversified. Equally, there is a need to engage Afghanistan's younger generation. Afghan youth stand to gain the most from the tangible benefits of peace: enhanced security, freedom of movement, and increased education and employment opportunities.

Madam President,

Afghanistan is set to hold a presidential election this year. We expect this to be a critical step forward in further consolidating its representative political system. The holding of the presidential election on schedule, however, will be very challenging. The widespread irregularities during last October's parliamentary elections undermined confidence in the electoral management bodies. These problems continued throughout the counting process, and the complete finalization of election results remains delayed for several months. As these problems mounted, political stakeholders expressed increasing scepticism about the ability of the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission to deliver a credible and timely presidential election.

In response to these concerns, the Election Law was amended by a presidential decree in consultation with stakeholders, and a selection process of new members and heads of secretariats for the two commissions was held in early March, involving civil society, political parties and the presidential candidates. The two commissions must now work to rebuild public trust in the country's electoral processes. The integrity and collegiality of the two bodies are critical as is the support of all government institutions, most notably the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. All candidates and political actors need to commit to respecting the independence of the two commissions to enable them to work without any interference. The United Nations is prepared to work closely with the newly composed commissions.

With less than five months remaining until election day, the technical and political challenges are daunting. The new commissioners will need to take urgent decisions on the implementation of the amended Election Law which provides for reforms, including the use of biometric technology and a change in the electoral system. In addition to the presidential election, the law provides for the conduct of three additional elections – provincial council elections, district-council elections, and parliamentary elections for the province of Ghazni. The commissioners will need to assess whether the current electoral calendar will permit the holding of four simultaneous elections in July. It will likely be a stark choice: to hold the presidential election on schedule; or implement all that are stipulated in the amended Election Law, knowing that this may entail a significant postponement of the presidential election. The United Nations will continue to work with Afghan stakeholders to



help them ensure that the electoral process is conducted in a credible, transparent and inclusive manner. It is important, however, that Afghan institutions and stakeholders fully realize that the ultimate responsibility and ownership for elections rests with the people of Afghanistan.

Madam President,

All this is taking place in the context of a war which continues to inflict a devastating toll on civilians. According to UNAMA's statistics, 2018 was the deadliest year on record for the Afghan conflict, with a total of 10,993 civilian casualties, including 3,804 civilians killed. In particular, deliberately targeting civilians is a war crime. Casualties caused by such attacks of Daesh/ISKP more than doubled from 2017 to 2018, accounting for over 50% of attributed attacks targeting civilians in 2018. Also alarming is the impact of the conflict on Afghan children. Last year, the number of children killed in the conflict reached a record high, with over 900 child deaths verified, and thousands more injured including by explosive remnants of war. They also remain vulnerable to recruitment and use by parties to the conflict.

But even these figures do not capture the full human cost of the war. We must not forget the harsh realities of life for too many people in Afghanistan. Today, over half the population in the country lives under the poverty line – the proportion increased from 37 percent in 2014 to 54 percent in 2018. Over the last year, severe drought has worsened living conditions still further; 13.5 million people in the country are severely food insecure. This means that they survive on less than one meal a day. The Government of Afghanistan, in partnership with the United Nations family, is doing what it can to address these urgent needs. Last year, the United Nations issued its Humanitarian Response Plan which was 78 percent funded, and this year we require 612 million US dollars. Whilst I wish to reiterate my gratitude to all donors who contributed generously last year, the response this year has started very slowly and currently stands at 4 percent. I hope that the Security Council would also call on the international community to boost funding to address this critical situation without delay.

Another major socio-economic challenge is the issue of narcotics. Despite a decrease in the opium production in 2018, the significant levels of opium poppy cultivation and illicit trafficking of opiates remain a threat to stability in the country. While a drug use survey has not been undertaken for a number of years, indications are that an estimated 10 percent of the adult population regularly use narcotics. In order to tackle this complex issue, the whole demand and supply chain needs to be addressed as a shared responsibility between Afghanistan, its neighbours and the international community.

Looking forward, Afghanistan and its international partners have begun exploring potential opportunities to expand development assistance in a post-settlement context. In order to contribute to a sustainable peace, such assistance must build on existing achievements, and must deliver tangible benefits to those most in need. As the political situation evolves, the United Nations family remains committed to supporting the country's humanitarian and development goals.

Madam President,

Now is the moment for the international community to look at Afghanistan with renewed eyes and reassess how we could contribute to the efforts for peace and to work with the people and the Government of Afghanistan to improve socio-economic conditions and to promote further development. This year is likely to bring both numerous challenges and unprecedented opportunities. Addressing the challenges, and taking advantage of the opportunities, will require the concerted efforts of the international community, with Afghanistan in the lead.

Thank you very much.

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UNAMA is mandated to support the Afghan Government and the people of Afghanistan as a political mission that provides 'good offices' among other key services. 'Good offices' are diplomatic steps the UN takes publicly and in private, drawing on its independence, impartiality and integrity, to prevent international disputes from arising, escalating or spreading. UNAMA assists the process of peace and reconciliation; monitors and promotes human rights, including the protection of civilians in armed conflict; promotes good governance; and encourages regional cooperation. The Mission also promotes coherent development support by the international community.

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