



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

*[as delivered]*

**New York, 17 September 2018**

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Mister President, Members of the Security Council,

It is a time for important decisions in Afghanistan. These decisions will affect the fundamental fabric of the society and the future of Afghanistan. The Afghan people are scheduled to cast their votes on 20 October to choose their parliamentary representatives for the first time since 2010. Strategic decisions, underpinned by a national consensus, will need to be taken to guide the next steps towards peace. And on 28 November in Geneva, the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations will co-chair a Ministerial conference on Afghanistan where all aspects of civilian efforts in the country will be placed on the table for review and mutual commitments.

Mister President,

Just over a month from now, the Afghan people are scheduled to go to the polls. I have met many Afghans across the country who have impressed upon me their desire to exercise their right to elect their representatives. Many will face considerable risks to do that.

Operationally and technically, the preparations are on track. Yet I remain very concerned that political challenges could jeopardize the tight timelines and derail the elections unless all political leaders engage constructively and peacefully to ensure that elections are held on time. Security is also a serious concern.

From a technical point of view alone, elections are possible. Candidates' lists were finalized in time to enable the printing of the ballots to meet the deadline. The recruitment of the election officials is on track. The Independent Election Commission, the IEC, announced that more than nine million had registered to vote. Many opposition parties remain sceptical about that number, citing both security concerns that would have prevented many people from registering and alleging fraud. Several safeguards for the verification of the voters list and fraud prevention measures are being put in place. Despite these measures, scepticism remains. Over the last few days, supporters of a coalition of political parties started to block several provincial election commissions demanding that additional safeguards be put in place. These actions hinder the work of the IEC and jeopardize the holding of the elections on time. Political concerns must be addressed through institutional mechanisms and not through blockades.

Regardless of the reforms which are being implemented, the parliamentary elections will undoubtedly be a major test for Afghanistan's young democratic institutions. Almost one third of Afghanistan's over seven thousand polling centres could not open due to insecurity. This is raising concerns about inclusivity. The main question, therefore, is not whether the elections will be imperfect but how Afghanistan's electoral institutions will manage these limitations. In my communications with political actors in Afghanistan, I have consistently stressed three key points. First, continued international support is not something to be taken



for granted. This will include the continuation of the constitutional order. Second, there must be an awareness that parliamentary elections have implications beyond choosing parliamentarians including on the presidential election in April 2019. We are aware of real fraud which might take place, as well as allegations of fraud which may have the tactical purpose of discrediting already difficult elections. Afghan institutions must combat both. Third, I urge all political actors and institutions to perform their duties, act responsibly, and to think of the Afghan people, bearing in mind the country's bitter past.

At this critical juncture the Independent Election Commission as the lead institution on elections will be looked upon to discharge its function with the highest degree of integrity, professionalism and with full accountability to the Afghan people. Afghan institutions and political leaders have the shared responsibility for the success of the elections. I also urge the IEC to redouble efforts to reach out to the public to increase awareness of this important process. UNAMA will do everything possible within our mandate and with the resources available to support a successful electoral process.

Mister President,

President Ghani's offer in February this year to the Taliban to engage in talks without preconditions has created unprecedented political space for peace, culminating in the temporary ceasefire in June. It showed that reconciliation was possible. This newfound momentum was further supported by numerous citizen mobilizations, demonstrating the desire for a peaceful future. The second ceasefire in August, proposed by the Government, was unfortunately not reciprocated by the Taliban. But peace processes rarely move along straight lines; setbacks were to be expected. Still, I believe that all actors recognized the craving of the Afghan people for peace and the undeniable need for a peace process. Whatever setbacks may lie ahead, we are in a better position now than at any time in the past 17 years to commence the process which would lead to talks for a negotiated end to the conflict.

The most difficult phases lie ahead. It will require resilience and persistence by all sides. The efforts of the Afghan Government, which we hope would be reciprocated by the Taliban, need to be reinforced by a coordinated approach of the regional and other key countries to move forward. I urge all sides to agree on concrete measures to build confidence towards more structured talks. These key confidence builders could include prisoner releases and their treatment; technical level measures in areas such as agriculture, education and health in contested areas; and lead to a cessation or at least a significant reduction in violence. All sides must realize that there is no military solution to the conflict. I also wish to underline the importance of ensuring the equal participation and full involvement of women in all efforts for the promotion, establishment and maintenance of peace and security.

The recent attack on the provincial capital of Ghazni and the frequent suicide attacks in Kabul and elsewhere remind us of the terrible toll on civilian lives and livelihoods. In the first six months of 2018, this year, UNAMA recorded the highest number of civilian deaths since the Mission started to track civilian casualties. In recent weeks we have also seen a continuation of the disturbing pattern of attacks targeting the Shi'a Muslim community. Each death is an individual tragedy. But it is also a tragedy for the country: reconciliation becomes harder with each life lost.



Insecurity is also taking its toll on journalists and aid workers. This year alone, 13 journalists have lost their lives and many more were wounded. This is the highest number of deaths in any country. I urge the Government to take additional measures to enhance their protection. Also this year, 23 aid workers have lost their lives; 37 have been injured; and 74 have been abducted, making Afghanistan the second most dangerous country in which this profession conducts its work precisely when 2.2 million people are suffering from the country's worst drought in years.

Mister President,

The Afghan Government and international partners will gather two months from now in Geneva at the ministerial level to discuss all aspects of civilian efforts in Afghanistan. This is the once in two years opportunity, at the ministerial level, to follow up on the mutual commitment made in Bonn in 2011. The Geneva Ministerial will be held at the mid-point of the Transformation Decade ending in 2024. Together with international long-term commitments in the security field, the Geneva ministerial will signal sustained political commitment to Afghanistan, provided that the Afghan side lives up to its commitment for reforms and development. The Afghan Government committed to the delivery of six benchmarks. They are the holding of parliamentary elections, advancing anti-corruption; reforming the security sector; meeting IMF benchmarks; promoting private sector development; and the development of national priority programmes. Geneva will also provide an opportunity for the international community to further clarify its expectations regarding the peace process and the ways it can support such a process.

Mister President,

We recently lost an icon of the international community. In 2001, former Secretary-General Kofi Annan began his Nobel Peace Prize speech with a few simple words: "Today in Afghanistan a girl will be born." That girl is now almost a woman, who soon will be old enough to vote, old enough to attend university, old enough to pursue the vocation of her dreams. Will she be able to? I am sure that that girl will be watching closely the developments of the next few months.

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.*