



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

[as delivered]

New York, 19 June 2019

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Mr. President,

Members of the Security Council,

One year ago, the people of Afghanistan celebrated an unprecedented three-day Eid ceasefire across the country. These moments of peaceful celebrations gave them a glimpse of life without conflict and allowed them to direct their gaze toward a more peaceful future. But the ensuing twelve months have also shown how arduous the path to peace is. Unfortunately, the Eid ceasefire was not replicated this year. Yet the foundations laid over the last year are not lost. Six weeks ago, thousands gathered to exchange ideas on peace at the Consultative Peace Jirga. Grassroots movements continued to march for peace. But before speaking more about this progress, allow me to first update you on preparations for the presidential election.

The presidential election scheduled for 28 September will be a key moment to reaffirm the legitimacy of Afghanistan's democratic political structure. Afghan citizens have displayed an enduring commitment to choosing their political leaders through elections in the face of threats and adverse security conditions. The electoral management bodies, state institutions, political leaders, candidates and international partners owe it to them to deliver credible and timely elections, and to accept the outcome of this process.

The decision of the Independent Electoral Commission, or the IEC, to prioritize the holding of presidential election on 28 September gave much-needed clarity to the electoral calendar. However, timelines remain very tight. Significant operational and technical challenges need to be overcome in order to deliver credible elections as scheduled. The IEC has made important progress in the past few weeks: the operational plan and the budget were finalized, and top-up voter registration started across the country in addition to full voter registration in Ghazni province. However, after last year's highly controversial parliamentary elections and subsequent dismissals of all electoral commissioners, the most daunting task for the new electoral management bodies is regaining public confidence. The IEC needs to demonstrate that it can address the problems which marred the parliamentary elections and integrate the lessons learned into preparations for the upcoming vote. These preparations must include improved procedures for publishing voter lists well in time, training of electoral staff, more robust outreach and voter sensitization, and the timely rollout of electoral technology.

The United Nations is working with the IEC and ECC, or the Election Complaints Commission, in all aspects of the electoral preparations with over 170 national and international staff. This includes four international non-voting commissioners, two for the IEC and two for the ECC who directly support the commissions in their task.

The political stakes are high and competition is intense. It is the responsibility of all political actors, including presidential candidates, and of security and government agencies, to ensure that the elections are contested on a level playing field. I remind all candidates – and their supporters – of the code of conduct they signed when submitting their nomination papers. I also urge all actors to exercise restraint, to show respect for state institutions, most importantly for the IEC and the ECC,



and to refrain from taking actions that could give any candidate undue advantage. As my predecessors in this forum have stressed, ahead of previous elections, all candidates must have equal access to state resources. Similarly, government officials must respect the principle of non-interference and refrain from using their position or resources to support a particular candidate.

This vital political groundwork needs to be laid now to ensure that the vote will be credible and the outcome accepted. Afghanistan cannot afford a contentious and protracted post-election crisis which could result in a President with brittle democratic domestic legitimacy. This would also harm the new President's ability to bring the Afghan people together in a meaningful and representative peace process.

Mr. President,

Today, the minds of the Afghan people and their international partners are more focused than ever on the need to reach a negotiated settlement. This momentum must not be lost. Direct talks between the United States and the Taliban continue with broad international support. Afghanistan and some of its international partners, in particular Germany and Qatar, are preparing for an intra-Afghan dialogue. The dialogue would bring together people's voices representing a wide spectrum of society. Some prominent Afghan actors already had the opportunity to exchange views with Taliban representatives in Moscow in late May. All these efforts need to be directed towards one common objective: to start formal negotiations between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban to reach a peace agreement.

I am encouraged by signs of increasing consultations between countries leading these initiatives in support of a political settlement. The common message to the Taliban is clear: come to the table and negotiate directly with the Afghan Government. I call upon those countries with direct contacts and with influence over the Taliban to intensify their efforts towards this goal. But ultimately, there is no substitute for the Afghan people taking ownership and advancing their inclusive dialogue towards a peace process. Government and political leaders must foster consensus and create structured arrangements to effectively represent the interests of all Afghan people in their engagement with the Taliban. Preparations for the presidential elections should not distract from the necessary work.

The pursuit of peace is at the forefront of the work by the United Nations in Afghanistan. We work on a broad spectrum of initiatives to help create the conditions for peace, ranging from support to Afghan grassroots organizations, dialogue with all parties concerned including the Taliban, to convening discussions on behalf of the international community. As we know from experience, even if an overall peace agreement is reached, implementation can be derailed by unaddressed local conflicts that have the potential to escalate. UNAMA has been working with local communities to support and strengthen their own mediation mechanisms so that they can themselves resolve their conflicts. As just one example, in Nangarhar, a 50-year old dispute over water resources between two tribes was resolved through local mediation that UNAMA supported. Women played an important role in building bridges across the communities. Initiatives such as these are a vital counterpart to global and regional efforts, where the UN's comparative advantage of impartiality is of particular relevance.

Mr. President,

Only an inclusive peace process which involves all those affected by the conflict – including women, youth, victims, business and religious leaders – can lead to sustainable peace. Afghan society will need to confront many difficult questions in a peace process, and much is at stake: the preservation of gains over the past 18 years; the role of women; questions of accountability; and how to reintegrate those who carried arms. The United Nations stands ready to support Afghans



as they tackle these fundamental issues which run through the very fabric of society. The United Nations is also committed to give priority to progress in the areas of women, peace and security – very important. We know from experience that this is the best and the only way to secure a sustainable peace agreement, and much needs to be done.

Afghanistan's people have the most to win from an end to the conflict. But they are also the ones who are still losing the most. Afghan civilians lost their lives, children are kept from classrooms, and people are deprived from fulfilling their economic potential. In the first quarter of this year alone, almost 1,800 Afghan civilians were killed or injured. This is less than in previous quarters but still far too many. I should like to point out here the egregiousness of deliberately targeting civilians by anti-Government elements. It is a war crime and must stop. I am concerned also about increasing harm, including deaths, to civilians from search operations as well as related human rights abuses. I reiterate the need for more transparency and accountability surrounding these operations.

The impact of the conflict on children is particularly alarming. Attacks on schools almost tripled between 2017 and 2018. Additional schools were closed due to insecurity, leaving almost half a million children unable to exercise their right to education. Schools used as voter registration sites and polling centres will be at an enhanced risk in the upcoming electoral period. I urge all anti-government elements to ensure that schools and health facilities used during the election remain protected from attacks; and the parties to the conflict to take the necessary measures to reduce the impact of the conflict on children and education.

Mr. President,

We cannot forget that 80 per cent of the country's people live on less than \$1.25 per day and in extremely precarious conditions marked by climate change and war. The impact of last year's drought is still felt today with up to ten million people food-insecure. Internal displacement remains high, with the single largest cause this year being the fighting between the Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan Province. I am grateful to all donors who already generously contributed funding for humanitarian programming this year. However, the response remains underfunded – 23 per cent – and I would ask again for your support to boost funding.

Mr. President,

Afghanistan has vast economic potential, yet it remains untapped because of the conflict. The state has made progress in anti-corruption and public sector reforms. Development partners have started to look beyond immediate needs and are exploring modalities for development assistance in a post-settlement context. But this important work can only bear fruit if a settlement is achieved. The road to peace is still long, but with our united support for Afghanistan's full ownership of the peace process, I am cautiously optimistic that we are moving in the right direction.

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.