



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

*[as delivered]*

**New York, 21 December 2015**

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Madam President, members of the Council,

I would like to describe briefly the situation in which Afghanistan finds itself at the end of the first year of its transformation decade, and to frame the challenges it faces in 2016.

The international civilian and military withdrawal at the end of 2014 coincided with a political transition and confronted Afghanistan with a triple set of challenges: economic, security and political.

The National Unity Government, itself a product of political crisis, inherited a weakening economy, an empty treasury and a war that it needed to fight with decreasing levels of international military assistance. None of these circumstances were of its own making. Indeed, a difficult year was expected. As President Ghani himself put it at the inter-ministerial meeting in Islamabad twelve days ago, Afghanistan would be fighting for its survival in 2015.

On the economic front, the fiscal gap between the revenue raised and spent by the Government would remain of concern. Poverty is no less prevalent, and the economic contraction has led to high unemployment and its attendant frustration, particularly among the youth. Corruption has yet to be overcome.

On the security front, there was an overall deterioration as the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) grappled with an intensified conflict but with much reduced international military support. Civilians, as ever, continue to bear the brunt of the conflict, as casualties rise at an ever increasing rate and more people have been displaced from their homes by the conflict.

On the political front, the National Unity Government has at times struggled to project the necessary national unity and has seen the level of its public support diminish markedly. An increasingly vocal political opposition has emerged, drawing on the anxiety generated by the perceived security deterioration and economic contraction.

As a consequence of this situation, many Afghans are anxious about the future. Some evidently feel that they have no choice other than to leave the country in search of economic and security opportunities elsewhere.

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While we must acknowledge these realities, we also must take note of the many significant steps being taken to keep Afghanistan on the path to stability and greater self-reliance.

While the challenges are of such a scale and complexity that any Government would be tested in its efforts to meet them head on, there has been progress nonetheless.

On the political front, the National Unity Government has held together and is advancing its agenda, including that of implementing the terms of the September 2014 political agreement, as well as attempting to professionalize the civil service. An example of progress would be the submission today of the second and final set of recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission. I look forward to the finalization of this process, which will allow for an electoral calendar to be set and will mark another step towards restoring public confidence in the electoral institutions and democratic process.

The United Nations maintains its view that there is no viable alternative to the National Unity Government, a point that, encouragingly, much of the Afghan political opposition also appears to recognize, as evidenced by the gathering of political critics that took place in Kabul just three days ago. We encourage a continued dialogue and outreach – within Government and outside – to ensure a greater unity of purpose, notably from the political elite, which is necessary for public confidence, governance reforms and military morale.

On the economic front, the Government is pressing forward with its reform agenda, as articulated in the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework and its thoughtful implementation plan. Economic growth, though low, is actually projected to increase in the next years. When it took office in 2014, the Government faced a significant year-end fiscal gap. In 2015, domestic revenues have increased and the Government is confident that it has averted a second fiscal crisis, albeit that this was managed primarily by failing to expend budgeted funds for development.

I commend the Government for continuing to put into place the building blocks for long-term economic improvement, including through an increased commitment to promoting regional economic integration. On that note, we welcome the recommitment by the members of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul process to shared objectives at the recent ministerial-level meeting in Islamabad. I would also like to draw attention to the ground-breaking ceremony, just last week in Ashgabat, for the launch of the TAPI natural gas pipeline, which will supply energy-hungry Afghanistan, Pakistan and India with natural gas from Turkmenistan. This is a noteworthy development, showing as it does just what can be achieved when Afghanistan and its neighbours work in partnership.

On the security front, the ANSF have shown resilience in the face of an intensified insurgency. Certainly the temporary loss of key district centres and the provincial centre of Kunduz city were worrying developments and revealed major ANSF shortcomings. However, almost all of the district centres have been retaken, as has Kunduz city. The ANSF may be stretched to capacity but, for the most part, they are holding their ground. This does not ignore the need for improvements to ANSF functioning, with a particular focus on logistics and administration, and

remedial measures to boost both morale and diminish rates of attrition, as well as continued international support for its attempts to build its own air support capabilities.

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Afghanistan, as a sovereign nation, confronting countless challenges, has made it through its first post-transition year, an achievement in itself. But in 2016, it is vital that the National Unity Government demonstrates increasingly its effectiveness, not only for the Afghan people but also for donors, on whom it is largely dependent for financial, material and technical assistance.

In 2016, the international community will make critical decisions on the level and type of assistance that it will continue to offer. In Warsaw, NATO countries will pledge for four years their further military commitment, while in Brussels the donor community will pledge its renewed civilian assistance. The international community, though committed to supporting Afghanistan, must make difficult choices as events elsewhere in the world compete for international attention and limited resources. For this reason, they will need to be assured, not only that their assistance meets evident needs, but that it will have a tangible impact. Afghanistan must show, in particular, that it is committed to tackling corruption, making the necessary governance reforms and generating hope for the future, which will decrease the rate of emigration. UNAMA will be encouraging donors to invest in Afghanistan's reconstruction and its security, rather than facing the costs of integrating immigrants.

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In the long term, the single development which would allow for material progress towards a stable and self-reliant Afghanistan would be an agreement between Afghans as to the arrangements by which they can live together in peace and harmony.

Beyond the immediate suffering being inflicted upon the Afghan people, the war is impeding efforts to bring political and economic progress that ultimately will ensure stability. Substantial human and material resources are being blocked or diverted on account of the insecurity. The situation cannot continue indefinitely – sooner or later the financial resources currently available to the country will diminish. Afghanistan needs to find a political route to peace.

After some promising developments earlier this year, most notably with the July talks in Murree, peace efforts reached an impasse as the Taliban leadership appeared to fragment and as strains appeared in Afghanistan/Pakistan relationship. The events in Kunduz also caused some to question whether the time was ripe for peace talks. This loss of momentum was disappointing, but peace processes rarely move forward in a linear fashion.

We welcome the reiteration, made on 9 December in Islamabad, by the Afghan Government of its commitment to a peace process.

I call upon the Taliban, who have not yet committed to entering into a peace process, to reciprocate the Government's commitment by themselves stepping forward to directly engage with the Government. There is no other way for insurgent groups to demonstrate a commitment to the welfare and prosperity of their fellow citizens than to search for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The reliance on violent conflict to achieve political ends places a question mark over their intentions.

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During 2016, UNAMA will continue to support the Afghan Government and people in laying the foundations for peace.

As part of its broader efforts, UNAMA will continue to pursue its three track approach to engagement with the Taliban: on human rights, humanitarian access and on political engagement.

On human rights, we will engage with the Taliban, as with the Government, on the issue of protection of civilians and on women's and children's rights. We continue to promote respect for, and adherence to, international human rights and humanitarian law.

On humanitarian affairs, the UN humanitarian agencies will continue to engage with the Taliban, again as with the Government, to promote humanitarian access to healthcare for those in need, wherever they are in Afghanistan, while ensuring protection for those who deliver such aid, especially in regard to polio immunization.

On political issues, we will continue to meet with the Taliban, with the knowledge and support of the Government, to explore possible entry points to a peace process and ways to conceptualize and promote the best format for talks, to build trust and confidence in a proper political engagement. During 2015 we floated several such proposals for talks and other initiatives which unfortunately failed to find traction.

We stand by our call for a Track I dialogue, namely direct, face-to-face negotiations between representatives of the Government and the Taliban leadership. We are encouraged specifically by the offers made by Pakistan, the United States and China on 9 December to support such a process.

UNAMA supports all efforts to establish a peace process. We continue to offer our good offices in any facilitative role, while recognizing that any peace process must be Afghan-owned and led.

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