



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

[as delivered]

New York, 21 December 2017

* * *

Mr. President, Esteemed Members of the Council,

As this calendar year closes, we are still left to tackle the issue that concerns us most in Afghanistan: a convincing peace process to end the forty years of conflict, which has left 39 per cent of the population under the poverty line, including 3.3 million in acute need of humanitarian aid. One year ago in this Council, I called upon all Afghans to come together and find ways to build their own joint future. I also called upon each country of the region to help create an environment conducive to peace in Afghanistan and the region. We must use the upcoming winter months, when conflict levels tend to decrease, to advance on this issue before the cycle of violence is renewed next spring.

How can this be done? The Kabul Process meeting planned for 1 February offers an opportunity. At the meeting, the Government of Afghanistan is expected to present its strategic concept for reaching a political settlement with the armed opposition, and seek the support of the international community. This chance must not be missed. The Government and the international partners must focus on how we can reduce the levels of violence next year. We must also seek commencement of a structured dialogue for peace. I once again call on the Taliban to express a clear willingness to begin negotiations towards a political settlement, and to start the initial dialogue.

I welcome the increased consultations among the countries in the region about securing peace in Afghanistan. Countries in the region recognise that they have common stake in the future of Afghanistan. Any regional consensus, however, must be built around a clear policy. Regional efforts for peace also need to be consolidated. This is why the Afghan Government's presentation to the Kabul Process conference is of such great importance.

Another crucial issue is the holding of parliamentary elections next year, followed by presidential elections in April 2019. The holding of timely, credible, and accepted elections is indispensable to maintaining the constitutional order and trust in the representative system of government.

There has been, to be frank, insufficient progress on electoral preparations. The lack of progress, and intense criticism from electoral stakeholders, led the independent electoral commission to vote to remove its chairman. The commission needs to demonstrably advance on electoral preparations to regain its credibility.

On a positive note, on 6 December the IEC finally announced the modalities which it will use to conduct voter registration. If implemented as planned, the process will result for the first time in a single, complete voter register, as well as polling station-based voter lists. This will significantly cut down on fraud by reducing the number of extra ballots that are distributed. The United Nations technical support team has been working closely with the IEC on the operational concept of voter registration and will assist the commission in its implementation,



though this is ultimately a process that must be owned and led by Afghan institutions. I should also like to underline security as a defining factor enabling credible and inclusive elections. The Afghan Government needs to have a thorough security plan for this democratic exercise.

UNAMA will continue its efforts to advance women's political participation. We recently convened 13 dialogues across the country where women described in often poignant terms how their participation as voters and candidates was obstructed by corruption, conflict and conservative cultural norms. Based upon these experiences, women offered practical recommendations to bolster women's strong participation in the 2018 elections and beyond.

Mr. President,

Despite an intense fighting season, recent efforts by Afghan security forces to protect civilians have resulted in reductions in civilian deaths and injuries caused by those forces during ground engagements. We, however, remain concerned by the continued indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices by anti-government elements, as well as civilian casualties from air strikes by pro-government forces. All in all, the number of civilian casualties remains at the terribly high levels. I continue to receive disturbing reports of child recruitment by armed groups, mainly Daesh and Taliban. I urge the parties to immediately cease this unlawful practice.

Afghanistan's election to the Human Rights Council provides an opportunity for all national institutions, including the military, to deliver on public pledges to comply with its international legal obligations. As an initial step, I encourage the Government to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and to withdraw its reservations to the Convention.

Mr. President,

We often overlook the impact of Afghanistan's economy on the society and the conflict. The significant reduction of the international military presence in 2014 led to a collapse in economic growth from 10 per cent to minus 2 per cent. This year, Afghanistan is expected to record positive growth for the second year, but not enough to absorb the 400,000 young Afghans who annually seek to join the labour force. At the same time, the illicit economy is expanding, as demonstrated by the massive increase in opium production recorded by UNODC in 2017. Narcotics trades are known to be a source of funds for insurgency. We must pay more focused attention to these issues and reinforce our efforts.

For the vision of Afghan economic development to succeed, the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework must be supported. The entire UN family is engaged in a continuing dialogue with the president on better aligning the UN's work to support the framework, providing value for money, and demonstrating impact.

The Government's goal is to reduce reliance on aid and secure its own tax base. This will require intense efforts to stimulate the private sector, reduce corruption and red tape, and build infrastructure which allows Afghanistan to benefit from its central geographic location. Once investment mechanisms and infrastructure are in place, Afghanistan's mineral wealth can be exploited. Achieving this goal *is* possible. This past year has seen important progress on infrastructure development with an eye to connecting Afghanistan to Europe through the Caspian and the Caucasus, and to the Arabian Sea.



These developments demonstrate how Afghanistan's relationships with its neighbours present opportunities for prosperity. But there are also obstacles. I am particularly concerned about recent reports of increased military activities between Afghanistan and Pakistan. UNAMA has recorded some of the suffering caused by such activities on local residents, including civilian casualties, closures of education facilities, and population displacement. I call on the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan to find ways of collaborating more effectively to address this issue, which affects the populations of both countries.

Mr. President,

The achievements in regional cooperation are encouraging. But the main dividends of regional cooperation cannot be achieved until there is peace and stability in Afghanistan. I do not believe that this sequence can be reversed. In the coming months, there must be significant progress on election preparations, real attempts to reduce violence, and the move towards a credible peace process. Because of the cyclical nature of the conflict, opportunities that are missed in the next three months will in all likelihood be missed for the next year.

Before closing my remarks, we request Members of this Council to lend their political and financial support for implementation of the Humanitarian Response Plan, which addresses 3.3 million people in need of such assistance.

Mr. President and members of the Council,

We see the need to focus on seeking peace. The United Nations is ready to do whatever it can, from raising the importance of this issue, as I have tried to do today, to using good offices for mediation, should that be requested. I truly hope that empathy for the ongoing suffering of millions of Afghans will move us all to make the efforts necessary to achieve peace and realize the important opportunities that lie beyond a much needed peace agreement.

Thank you.

* * *

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.