



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

[as delivered]

New York, 21 June 2016

Mr. President, Members of the Council,

In my previous statement to this Council in March, I said that in 2016 survival of the National Unity Government would be an achievement. I stressed that the Government had to overcome five distinct hurdles to prevail. The Government would need to tackle a potent conflation of political, economic and security challenges. To do so, it would also need to face two additional challenges: that of securing medium-term financial and military assistance from the international community; and, finally, of making headway in laying the foundation for an effective peace process. Failure to overcome any of these distinct hurdles could have a significant consequence for the country.

This is not to downplay the real progress that Afghanistan has made over the past decade especially, for example, in education, human and especially women's rights, and in the emergence of a vibrant democratic culture. This progress is widely acknowledged, and rightly so. Rather, the objective was to draw attention to the formidable obstacles that Afghanistan faces and to underline the need for a concerted response to these challenges from all stakeholders, including the international community.

Mr. President,

I am pleased to note that there have been positive steps in meeting some of these five challenges since I last addressed this Council. On the economic front, we have noted progress in revenue collection, in meeting IMF benchmarks and in developing thoughtful medium-term plans for reform and for economic development under difficult conditions. There has also been distinct progress in the management of public finances. And we do not fear as we did only two years ago of an imminent default in civil service salary payments.

We should acknowledge some milestones that have been reached on some of the more ambitious projects developed in collaboration with other countries in the region. The past month has seen the inauguration of the Salma hydroelectric dam, the CASA 1000 electricity project and a trilateral economic agreement between Afghanistan, India and Iran. The agreement on the development of the Chabahar port will open up a major new corridor for regional trade.

These developments come on the back of the earlier launch of the TAPI project. And projects of such scale take time to deliver, but have real potential to transform Afghanistan into the regional hub it aspires to be. They show what can be achieved through regional partnerships.

Mr. President,

On the security front, there has been a deliberate response by the security forces to the lessons learned from the dynamics and developments of last year. The battlefield in many areas is in a state of flux, with gains and reversals but with neither side effecting clear dominance. The security forces continue to face serious challenges, including in addressing questions of morale, leadership, attrition and logistics. For now, though, they are holding their ground.

I am pleased to note that the nominees for the positions of Minister of Defence and head of the National Directorate for Security were confirmed by the Wolesi Jirga only yesterday. This is a positive development that ends a protracted period of uncertainty and which will hopefully have both a positive operational impact and boost morale.

Afghanistan has, quite correctly, been canvassing support for a regional counter-terrorism strategy, recognizing that peace in Afghanistan and stability in the region demands and deserves a regional effort. And I believe that the region accepts this logic and this responsibility.

I remain, however, deeply concerned about the impact that the high level of violence is having on the civilian population. There has been no let-up during Ramadan, during which period there have been some reports of disturbing brutality, including attacks on worshippers. Only yesterday, an incident – in Badakhshan – caused the death of 10 civilians, among them several children. Civilian casualty levels remain high and conflict-related displacement continues. I am especially concerned about the trend of targeted attacks on civilians working in the judicial sector, and on journalists.

There is a risk, in my view, that the conflict may enter a new phase, which could see retaliatory acts of vengeance and an escalating spiral of violence. I remind all parties to the conflict of their obligations to protect civilians from the impact of hostilities. Perpetrators of human rights and humanitarian law violations must be held to account, both to ensure justice for victims and to effectively reduce harm to the civilian population through deterrence. UNAMA has especially had cause recently to draw attention to the inviolate status of schools and medical clinics during conflict.

Mr. President,

Progress in the above areas – economy and security – is imperative so that the Afghan people have confidence in their Government, and is especially important at this time, as the Government seeks to secure in Warsaw and in Brussels a firm and long-term commitment of international support, the third hurdle.

The serious engagement by the Government with donors to address the issues that would promote success at these meetings is acknowledged. We will strongly support the Afghan appeal that development assistance is a more effective way of dealing with migration than bearing the expense of integrating migrants in the host countries themselves. However, what is expected of Afghanistan is not proof of Afghanistan's considerable needs but its demonstrable capacity to utilize resources effectively so that this aid has a real impact.

There have been real attempts to meet donor expectations, as we have seen through progress in refreshing the mutual accountability indicators and in providing in Afghanistan a development framework. Efforts to counter corruption are moving beyond statements of intent. The establishment by President Ghani of the High Council of Governance, Justice and Anti-Corruption is a first step in this regard, as is the creation of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre. The appointment of a new Attorney General was another positive step. The challenge ahead will be to demonstrate results, not only on paper and in the machinery of governance but also in the everyday lives of Afghans.

While we remain hopeful that Warsaw will be successful, preparations for Brussels are still a work in progress. Afghanistan needs increasingly to appreciate the range of compelling demands from other countries competing for donor dollars. The donor community for its part needs to recognize that its expectations of reform should be realistic when measured against the full range of challenges facing the Afghan state.

Mr. President,

Regarding the establishment of a viable peace process, with the failure so far of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group to midwife such a process, and the recent death of Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, such a process seems unlikely in the short term. We believe, however, that there are elements within the Taliban movement who are questioning whether they can win militarily, at least in the short term, and wonder whether a purely military goal is desirable.

During my tenure, UNAMA has engaged intensively in the pursuit of peace, both by supporting others' initiatives and by proposing and pursuing our own. We have most recently teamed up with the Organization for Islamic Cooperation to insist jointly to the Taliban on the need for a viable peace process, and that a peaceful resolution of this long and bitter conflict is not a second prize – but a preferred outcome. A continued refusal to accept this will earn them only outcast status.

We maintain our view that peace is not a luxury, but a necessity, without which Afghanistan as we know it is not sustainable. Afghans must eventually agree the arrangements by which they can live together in peace and harmony. I am disappointed that there has been not yet any traction on peace efforts, but remain optimistic that such a process will eventually emerge.

Mr. President,

Finally, on the political front, slow progress in advancing electoral reforms and setting an election calendar is one indicator of the need for greater political cohesion, a need for an appreciation by a fragmented political class of their shared destiny. On 13 June, the Wolesi Jirga voted against the draft Structure Law, necessitating further review and discussions. The 17th of June, the latest date as per constitutional requirements to announce the electoral calendar for the promised elections on the 15th of October, has come and gone, and there still appears to be no agreement on the way forward.

Continued uncertainty about the electoral calendar will contribute to challenges to the legitimacy of both the National Unity Government and the Parliament, which has long overstepped its term of office. An increasingly vocal opposition, drawing on the dissatisfaction prompted by the economic and security downturn, but otherwise divided in its aspirations, appears to be coalescing around a common demand for a new Government arrangement.

A political confrontation is the last thing Afghanistan needs as it endeavours to cope with its current challenges, particularly in the period immediately preceding the Brussels conference, when Government effectiveness will surely fall under the spotlight. I, together with my international colleagues, have urged all political leaders to adopt a broader, more collaborative approach rather than fragmentation and division. And this applies to the cohabitation between the Legislature and the Executive, between the elements within the National Unity Government, as well as with the political opposition outside it.

Mr. President,

Looking forward, with the insights I have gained over these past four years I remain optimistic that Afghans can meet the challenges that confront them. On this I rely on an appreciation of two qualities. The first is the resilience of the Afghan people in facing down their difficult challenges. The second is the existence of a real pan-Afghan patriotism that survives in the face of sectarian loyalties. This is a quality that, from my experience in other war-afflicted countries, should not be undervalued. Endowed with these two qualities, it is possible for Afghanistan not only to survive in 2016 but to grow stronger as a result.

As this is my last briefing to this Council in my capacity as Special Representative for Afghanistan, I would like to thank my colleagues for their dedication to the work and values of the United Nations. A Mission functions on the enthusiasm, professionalism and commitment of its staff. And in UNAMA, I was extremely well served.

Thank you.

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kabul, Afghanistan

For more information, please contact: Spokesperson-UNAMA@un.org

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