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Transcript

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TRANSCRIPT

Press Conference by the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ján Kubiš

(near verbatim; edited for clarity)

Kabul – Wednesday, 2 April 2014

Participants:

- **United Nations Special Representative for Afghanistan Ján Kubiš**
- **UNAMA Spokesperson Nazifullah Salarzai**

Nazifullah Salarzai: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to today's press conference. The speaker in this press conference needs no introduction – the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Ján Kubiš – who will open the press conference today and after his remarks, we will open the floor for questions. If you can please switch off your mobiles or put them on vibrate. With no further ado, over to you. There is a request from all journalists if you can do four or five interpreted sentences at a time.

Ján Kubiš: Salaam alakoom. Good morning. Thank you very much for coming. I know that there are many events happening here in Kabul and the country at the same time. I am very grateful to you that you are with me this morning. As is customary, I wanted to come and brief you about the recent meeting of the Security Council that discussed the report of the Secretary-General on Afghanistan and extended the mandate of UNAMA [United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan] for one more year.

I will not speak in detail about the mandate. The mandate remains basically the same, with the same core priorities – providing good offices, helping the country in development, following and promoting human rights, working on humanitarian issues, supporting the authorities and

institutions of the country in regard to the elections this year but also next year's election – the parliamentary elections. So the whole complexity of my mandate has been confirmed.

Perhaps the most important political message, in principle, was the continuous commitment of the international community and of the United Nations to Afghanistan, to supporting Afghanistan, to working with Afghanistan for years to come. The mandate was extended for one year, but many delegations, members of the Security Council, but also countries in the neighbourhood and many others who took the floor – and it was, indeed, a lot of delegations speaking – all of them saying “we are with Afghanistan for many years to come; we will work with and support Afghanistan.” This is very important in this period of transition and, as we know, the end of ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] operations here in the country. This brings a lot of questions about the continuous support of the international community. The support is there – the support was pledged very strongly.

The second strong message came very prominently from the countries in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan and critical partners, strategic partners, of Afghanistan. The neighbouring countries, and you know who is in your neighbourhood, they pledged themselves and committed themselves to work for regional security, stability and cooperation; to promote it and to help Afghanistan in this situation and period of transition. Of course, there was a major discussion about all the processes that are here. But this new engagement and commitment of the countries of the region is very important because, without that, it would be very difficult to build a very prosperous future for Afghanistan and for the whole region in which Afghanistan is at the heart of.

The third and, again very timely, message and issue that dominated the discussion was the elections. The transfer of political authority in a democratic way through the process of elections – Presidential elections and Provincial Council elections that are due on the 5th of April. I was very happy to see a very strong message of confidence and hope that Afghanistan and the Afghan people will go with flying colours through this process, [that they] will take part in a process that is much better prepared, including on the side of security but also technical preparations, fraud mitigation and prevention measures. It gives a promise to strengthen the stability and unity of the country and one of the strong underlying arguments behind this conviction that the elections will be successful. It was mentioned in many statements that the enthusiasm of the people of Afghanistan in going to register, that tens of thousands are participating in massive rallies convened by many candidates and they are showing their strong commitment to take part in the elections that will determine the future of the nation.

First of all, that was again encouraging – the message was about hope and good expectations. Before, during previous meetings of the Security Council, many members of the Security Council had a lot of questions, including whether the election will take place, what are the arrangements, whether it could be better, more inclusive, more representative. This time, the message was that the preparations are better, that the country is heading towards the elections, the elections will take place and they are already – the preparations and the country are already making a history in moving forward with the elections. These elections are really Afghan-

owned, Afghan-led and Afghan-managed. People are showing enthusiasm in the election preparations and there is indeed quite a strong hope, and quite a degree of confidence, that the election will mark yet another indispensable step in moving forward in building democracy, but also in providing the necessary legitimacy to the next leadership that should be accepted by the majority, and that the majority should be given an opportunity and is given an opportunity to take part in the vote.

It was acknowledged that the elections are prepared in a much better way than at any time in the past, that they are prepared on the basis of valid legislation, that the responsible election bodies – two independent election commissions – are now working and are delivering results, that they are fully on top of the election preparations, that they cooperate with necessary state institutions, notably, on security-related issues. It was acknowledged also as a good omen and good fundament for better elections – more inclusive, more participatory than at any time in the past.

Members of the Security Council welcomed a vigorous and respectful campaign of candidates – for Provincial Council and Presidential candidates – and emphasized the responsibility of candidates in contributing to the fairness of the process and acceptance of the result. It was noted that this kind of campaign again bears a promise that the election will be respectful, that the candidates and authorities and electoral institutions – all are and will be committed to avoid fraud, that candidates also guide their supporters not to commit fraud and not to allow fraud to be committed in their name, or fraud to be committed as such. But there was an expectation as well, based on better preparations, that this time the elections could be better also from the point of less fraud than in the previous elections, because technical preparations are also much better from the point of view of fraud mitigation and prevention than at any time before. So again there were positive messages of expectations based on good preparations up until now.

Of course there are questions about security, naturally, and there was a strong condemnation of acts against candidates, against election workers, of intimidation or direct attacks which are taking place. At the same time, there was acknowledgement of the hard work of respective state organs to ensure the security of polling stations and polling centres, to contribute and ensure security to the extent maximum of those candidates that would like to present themselves as candidates, to ensure security for voters and for observers, and for the agents of candidates and political parties.

It was acknowledged that the preparations are again much better, much more comprehensive and that they provide for better security, although not perfect security, as all of us know. It was another encouraging signal.

Based on all of these, there is again an expectation, and encouragement, for all eligible voters to go and vote, to use the opportunity. The votes of people who will come to the elections will not be wasted. This time, the conditions are better; this time, it is possible and necessary to use the opportunity and go and vote. Yes, there might be difficulties and security problems. Nevertheless, the overall preparations, the overall atmosphere is much better.

And again, it was noted that the respective organs of the state try to do their best to ensure security. It was also noted that it means security for everyone, but, in particular, it was appreciated that women candidates that would like to take part in the elections for Provincial Councils, or are a part of the teams of different [presidential candidates], that they [women] have enough confidence, protection and support against intimidation and against threats. It was acknowledged that, indeed, steps have been taken in this sense.

So altogether, again, based on good preparations, based on vigorous campaigns, based on strong enthusiasm of the people and of the country, the message was to the people of Afghanistan: use this chance, this is your chance, this is your right; you should not allow anyone to deprive you of your right to go and vote and determine, by peaceful democratic means, the future of your country, the future of your children, of your families, perhaps for the first time in the modern history of the country, not by force, but by your vote.

And that is the message I would like to reinforce here today as well.

Nazifullah Salarzai: It's time for your questions. Please introduce yourself and one question at a time.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1TV [translated from Dari]: You stressed that the preparations for the upcoming elections are much better compared to the previous elections. I just wanted to know the reasons for these elections being better than previous ones. Are there certain factors because those previous elections were held in worse conditions, or that people have realized the importance of their votes? And, is the United Nations Security Council confident that democracy is being institutionalized in Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan understand the value of their votes? if you could please elaborate on this. And, the concerns President Karzai and others had about interference in the elections, are they not there anymore?

Ján Kubiš: Thank you very much. So many questions in this one question that it is difficult not to speak on several topics, but I will try to be focused. First of all, I would like to say that indeed the people of Afghanistan understand how important it is to use the opportunity; how critical it is for the future of the country and that this time it is their vote, their decision, that will shape the future of the country – not any sort of interference, not any sort of design – it will be through the elections.

Yes, the elections will not be perfect, but it is the elections, the democratic, political instrument and people of Afghanistan. They have a much better understanding of how and why to use this democratic political instrument that this is the only way, the right way forward. And, again, the best proof is what all of us have witnessed in the past period of several months, starting with very vigorous discussions and process of registration of candidates, Provincial Council

candidates and Presidential candidates, and the process of campaigning very vigorously, where people with enthusiasm, both in big cities but also in rural areas, are taking part in campaigning, in mobilizing forces for the elections, in registering themselves, participating in different, massive rallies. It is just enough to look around the country. And I am impressed, as mostly likely you are, when I see rallies of tens of thousands of people with participation, not only of the people of the cities, but also in rural areas, and you have a similar picture.

This is very encouraging and this is also showing that people have changed their attitudes. Now they know this the way forward, that they cannot simply delegate their future to just a handful of individuals. That it is their right, it is their choice and it is their future and that is why they would like to give their vote and have a voice.

But also, technically, the elections are much more prepared. This is not only our assessment, this is the assessment of domestic observers, of those who are dealing with elections, this is the assessment of candidates, and this is also the assessment of international experts.

There will be a time after the elections [inaudible] to witness in which cases and how technically the elections are much more prepared than any time before, but it is acknowledged already, as I said, by the people here, and also by international experts.

You have two independent electoral institutions – the [Independent] Electoral Complaints Commission and the Independent Election Commission – working on the basis of law, working on the basis of clear regulations and, what is important, working in cooperation with each other while respecting the division of labour as given by the law. They are showing their vigour and their determination to work according to their mandates in line with the Constitution, the laws and regulations. You see it also in the way how they act in regard, for example, to questions or complaints that reach them. Only recently, yesterday, if I am not wrong, the Complaint Commission adjudicated some complaints.

Reuters: This elections is likely to be a very protracted process, we are not going to hear the initial results for several weeks after the elections, and if there is a second round again, it may take weeks if not months until we know the name of the next President, and there is a view among the diplomatic community here that the process could last as long as up until October this year. I was just wondering whether you think that the protracted nature of the electoral process is only adding to the sense of uncertainty among the people and increasing security risks in the country? Thank you.

Ján Kubiš: Not necessarily must there be a protracted period that would lead us to this summer or early autumn. On the contrary, preparations for the elections are as such that they should enable timely tallying of votes and timely adjudication of complaints. So, I would say that of course we will know better after the election day here, because that would be a strong indication of how many people voted, what would happen in polling centres, polling stations, and what would be the general situation. But I would say that, at this point in time, there is no need to speculate too much because the preparations are better than at any time before.

Berlek TV [translated from Dari]: My question is about the concern among people about the manipulation of elections. As we experienced in the past, after elections it was clear that some western countries, like the United States, had a major role in election manipulation. What concerns does the UN Security Council have about there again being manipulation in favour of a candidate in the upcoming elections? Thank you.

Ján Kubiš: No. A simple response is no. There is no foreign interference in your elections that you are referring to. You referred to one country, you referred to the west – there is no intention. On the contrary, there is no interference. These elections are the elections of the Afghan people, Afghan political forces, Afghan candidates. It is a real choice of Afghanistan that you will see.

Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty: I have two short questions. First of all, will you observe the upcoming elections and, if it is yes, how? And, second question, you mentioned regional and neighbouring countries being committed to Afghanistan. But, unfortunately, the Afghan Government has complained about Pakistan. The Afghan Government says that Pakistan Government is not honest with Afghanistan, and that the latest attack on Kabul was supported and planned in Pakistan. What is your comment on that?

Ján Kubiš: Observation is critical for the quality of the elections. It brings confidence that the votes of the people will be respected, that there will be no massive manipulation. Therefore, I am very much encouraged to see that is already above 200,000, if I am not wrong, or already 230,000 at this point of time, [in terms of the number of] candidates' agents, party agents, domestic observers, domestic media, international media and international observers, who have registered themselves and will be present at polling centres and polling stations throughout the country to work against fraud, to prevent and discourage anyone who wants to manipulate and commit fraud. So observation is extremely important.

We, as the United Nations, will not observe the elections because we provide technical, expert and other support to the electoral bodies, but there will be hundreds of international observers that have already registered themselves. But, even more importantly, critically important, as I said, there will be over 200,000 domestic observers, party agents and candidate's agents. This is what is needed because this makes difference. Domestic observation, domestic party and candidates' agents that will watch what is happening and, in case of need, report and request that the [relevant] electoral body act against fraud.

As far as neighbouring countries – and Pakistan because Pakistan was mentioned directly – I can say only one thing and that is that all that we know, all that I heard personally, for example, during my last visit in Pakistan three weeks ago was: we need and we support peaceful participatory, solid elections in Afghanistan. We need stability in Afghanistan, and it can be delivered through good elections with good participation. We do not and we will not interfere in what is an internal issue for Afghanistan. We do not have any preferred candidate, but we strongly support good quality elections with good participation in Afghanistan because this is the

prerequisite for the future cooperation between the two countries, for the stability and prosperity of both countries and the whole region.

National Public Radio: Do you think women will vote in large numbers in this year. And what concerns do you have about women's participation in the upcoming elections?

Ján Kubiš: I think that it would not be conceivable to think about good quality elections without good participation of women of the country. They account for at least, schematically, fifty per cent of the population of the country. How would you wish to speak about real good elections as a political and democratic process without the participation of women? That is why we are very much encouraged to see women candidates for Provincial Council – a good number of women candidates. We are encouraged to see during the top-up for new voter registration [exercise] that just ended, that some four million became newly-registered voters, up to 35 per cent [of the total number of registrations during the top-up exercise] were women. This is not bad, it could be better, but this is not bad. And we hope that, both as candidates and as voters, as many women as possible will go and vote and use their chance to vote for their future, for their families, for their children.

And indeed, it needs a degree of courage, sometimes even more courage than men, to register as candidates, and to go and vote. And yes, unfortunately, there are issues and instances of intimidation, pressure and direct threats. For women it is more difficult to act like this, that's why we tried to work as their advocate as well, and I am happy to acknowledge that whenever we raise the issues of better protection and security for women candidates and for women voters, including, for example, the necessary number of female searchers that should be recruited, trained and deployed, and conditions that would enable them to be recruited and deployed, we received a good response – be it from the Independent Election Commission or from the Ministry of Interior Affairs.

In the past ten days this issue was discussed several times with Minister Daudzai, the Minister of Interior Affairs. We encouraged that, for example, he immediately instructed the provincial police chiefs, and the whole system, to take the necessary steps to ensure security for women candidates and women voters.

The Australian: There has been number of international monitoring groups that have either left the country or scaled back their operation because of the recent violence. And speaking with the Director of FEFA yesterday, they also had issue with domestic observers leaving because of fear of violence. Are you concerned at all about the number of monitors that will be available on Election Day?

Ján Kubiš: As I said, observation is extremely important for the quality, credibility, and legitimacy of the outcome of the elections, and acceptance of the elections, by the people and by the candidates. Therefore, we are very much encouraged, that in spite of some questions that might be there about arrangements or about security, that we see an avalanche, a strong

wave of interest, of registration of domestic observers, party agents, candidates' agents, etc. As I said, it is now over 200,000 and the figure will grow. This is the information that we have.

It is the domestic observers that are important, international observers will help, and yes, although there was a certain readjustment, basically all the groups that have registered themselves remained here. Some of them scaled down their numbers a little bit or readjusted their posture, but basically all the groups remained here. There was one international observer group, it is now considering how to act but even their structures will remain in the country and might be engaged in election observation during Election Day.

Thank you.