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Mr. President, I will start with some developments that are not reported frequently and do not receive the public attention they deserve. Nonetheless, they are important if we are to form a more complete picture of developments in Afghanistan.

First, after all the changes that have taken place over the last six months, the Afghan government is today better and more competent than ever before. And the level of provincial governance is higher.

Second, the cooperation between key elements inside the government has improved. That applies most prominently to the security ministries and institutions. And the results are clear: we see an enhanced ability to uncover terrorist networks and to prevent attacks from taking place. Yes there have been some spectacular terrorist attacks in the capital. But the overall number of attacks in Kabul has gone down, not least due to this improved coordination.

The economic ministries also work in a more coherent way following changes in the leadership of the Ministries of Finance, Agriculture and Commerce. This should enable the government to develop more unified economic policies.

Third, these changes have enabled the government to address better some of our main longstanding concerns.

With regard to the police, a comprehensive reform is underway to strengthen and clean up the police force. This should lead to a more efficient fight against the insurgency, greater respect for the rule of law and an enhanced ability to fight corruption. A significant number of police officers have been removed and are being prosecuted.

A national agricultural strategy will be launched in April. It will include all major sectors of agriculture and establish pool funding for donors. The main objectives will be to increase agricultural production, develop marketing capabilities and enhance rural employment. The new team in the Ministry of Commerce is addressing the challenges of private sector development: the establishment of the legal framework, the setting of investment promotion priorities, licensing reform and trade and transit agreements with neighbouring states.

And let me remind you; police, agriculture and private sector development have all suffered from serious neglect for years. Now they are being addressed as priority areas. Fourth, the improved internal cohesion we now see emerging could help us overcome the fragmentation which has hampered coordination with the international community. A stronger Afghan counterpart will allow us to make better use of our main coordination instrument, the JCMB.

Fifth, the prognosis for poppy cultivation for 2009 indicates that there is a potential for a very significant decline in production across the country. We could see a further and significant increase in the number of poppy-free provinces as well as serious reductions

in poppy production in the south. That would be a turning point in our counter narcotics efforts.

Mr. President, these developments represent potential success stories. I underline the word potential. To turn them into reality will to a large extent depend on the ability of the international community to respond quickly in support:

There is a need to provide trainers, mentors and equipment to the police.

There is a need to adjust and strengthen agricultural assistance to respond flexibly to new priorities and programmes.

There is a need to provide support for governors who are determined to make their provinces poppy-free and to farmers who are ready to switch from poppy to licit crops. If we could succeed in these key areas, then we would truly live up to the commitments and priorities set out at the Paris conference in June last year. And we would—for the first time—be able to address seriously some of our longstanding and deepest concerns: fighting corruption and crime, reducing the flow of financial resources to the insurgency, and improving food security. There are no quick fixes. It will take time. But there are promising developments for the first time in many years. If we do not respond quickly, then we may well face new stagnation and even backlash in several of these sectors. That we cannot afford. Progress in each of them will contribute to political stability, to economic growth - and be critical components in any international exit strategy.

The main credit for current positive developments must go to competent Afghan Ministers and officials. However, they would not have been possible without the presence and commitment of the international community, civilian and military. So this is not a time to waiver. It is a time to remain committed.

These positive trends are so often overshadowed by more dramatic events and political developments; at this point mainly the security situation and the intense debate about the Presidential and Provincial elections.

The security situation has deteriorated over the last months. A mild winter provided a suitable environment to keep up high levels of violence. And an early Ramadan allowed for a prolonged fighting season. As a result the overall number of security incidents in December was 42 per cent higher than in December 2007 and in January this year 75 per cent higher than in January 2008. As I mentioned, the number of incidents in Kabul has, however, gone down, partly due to the improved performance of Afghan security forces. But we have to expect an intense fighting season starting a few weeks from now. The election process has taken centre stage in our efforts in Kabul as well as in the media. We now have an agreement on the election date, 20 August. We can plan – in terms of financing, procurement, training, organization and security - on the basis of a clear time frame.

The main political challenge now is to resolve the dispute regarding what will happen between 22 May—when the current presidential term ends according to the Constitution—and the beginning of the next presidential term.

Our message to Afghan politicians is crystal clear; they must reach a political consensus which ensures the continued legitimacy and strength of Afghanistan's institutions until the next presidential inauguration. Reaching such a consensus is a matter of vital national interest. Such consensus has been reached in the past when national interests were at stake. But when leaders have failed to reach a national consensus, the costs for the country have been high.

The international community has 70,000 troops in Afghanistan operating alongside Afghan forces. Billions of dollars are invested. The summer months represent the peak of the fighting season. We cannot afford that these three months also become a period of

political and constitutional instability. We need a government and we need institutions that can continue their work with full strength and broad legitimacy.

We also have a message to the Government. The opposition has concerns that are real and well-founded. They relate to the transparency and fairness of the election process. The Afghan Government must demonstrate that it will do its utmost to reassure the opposition that elections will be fair and will be transparent and that the resources of incumbency will not be misused.

Finally, there is a message for the international community. We must also do our utmost to establish mechanisms with the very same objectives – transparency and fairness - in cooperation with Afghan authorities and civil society. I urge those who have been invited to send international observer missions—the European Union and the OSCE—to play their parts fully alongside domestic observation efforts. The UN and the IEC will establish an Election Complaints Commission, which will be as robust as possible under current circumstances. A Media Commission will be set up to monitor access to media. The UN and the AIHRC will monitor respect for political rights.

All involved, the government, the opposition, and the international community, must understand the costs of a flawed and unfair election process. The result would be prolonged political instability when stability is more than ever required. And the result would create doubt in the minds of many Afghans about the value of democratic processes when confidence is needed.

Mr. President, civil-military cooperation is an important part of our mandate. The relationship between ISAF and the UN Mission has continued to improve. Together with the Afghan government we have come a long way in formulating the integrated approach we have been talking about for years. The aim is simple; to allocate our overall resources—civilian and military—in a way that would allow us to make the best possible use of them: To strengthen development efforts where they can proceed unhindered and to provide a better basis of governance in swing districts, gradually attracting more civilian development where such activities have been difficult. We must learn to work together, in a different way than in the past.

The UN has taken a lead in addressing civilian casualties and military behaviour, which does not adequately respect Afghan cultural sensitivities. This follows from our obligation to protect and promote human rights. But our engagement is also motivated by the need to ensure strong Afghan support for a continued international engagement. We have seen how serious incidents have not only affected the support for the international military presence, but also made the humanitarian and development community more vulnerable. The number of civilian casualties rose by 40 per cent last year, with the insurgency accounting for the majority of such casualties. I am pleased to see that the commander of international forces, General McKiernan is addressing this problem strongly in his instructions to the troops; to minimize the use of airpower, to improve coordination with Afghan security forces -giving them the lead where possible - and to respect the cultural sensitivities of the Afghan population. President Karzai has expressed his views strongly and repeatedly. These views shared by many Afghans. And they are now being listened to and addressed. Unfortunately, insurgency groups continue their indiscriminate and deliberate attacks on civilians.

I understand those who say that an increased troop level may reduce the requirement to use airpower and lead to a lower number of civilian casualties. But we should admit the danger of the opposite happening. Additional troops will mean more fighting. With more troops and frequent troop rotation the international military forces must ensure that they operate in a way that solidifies both the support of the Afghan public and that of the public in troop contributing countries. If that support were to erode, then our entire endeavour would be in jeopardy.

Mr. President, inadequate donor coordination is a major concern to all of us and a priority element of our mandate. We have made progress in some areas. Political coordination is

better than before. With regard to donor coordination the picture is more complex and less encouraging. There have in recent months been a number of discussions of policy-shaping, which I hope will gradually be reflected in policy-making. Furthermore, some countries are channelling more resources through national programmes and the Afghan budget. But I continue to have serious worries about a number of our practices.

First, we must – as much as possible – move away from the use of contractors that are often overpaid and under qualified, whose aim is to finish projects quickly before they move on to the next. The short-term costs of such development policies are high and the long-term impact is low. We must be better at measuring our achievements in terms of impact, cost-effectiveness and effect on capacity-building.

Second, I come back to what I have called “donor generated fragmentation of Afghanistan”. I understand the need to build where you fight. But the lack of balance is wrong and still getting worse, despite constant warnings and agreed commitments. An increasing number of donors are taking an increasingly province-based perspective of Afghanistan. A shared nationwide perspective is required. If the current trend is not corrected then I fear turbulence where there is still stability as well as an increasing inability to implement national programs.

Third, where possible international military should channel development resources through civilian institutions - preferably Afghan - rather than doing the development work themselves. I would recommend all PRTs to channel development resources through often under-funded, but successful mechanisms such as the National Solidarity Program. That would make projects less expensive and more sustainable. And it would enhance the position of Afghan authorities in the eyes of their public.

Today, I believe that the use of between 500 million and 1 billion dollars are never reported to the Afghan government. Consequently, Afghan authorities do not know - and we do not know - how much is spent across the country and for what purpose. As a result of lack of coordination and transparency large parts of the national development strategy will go unfunded. By far the majority of all aid is spent outside the control of the Government. And any attempt to influence how it is spent is hampered by the extraordinary complexity of the international donors system.

We will soon – with the assistance of the World Bank – set up a new, comprehensive and easily accessible database in the Ministries of Economy and Finance. I urge all donors to make full use of it. So many donors I meet underline the need for better coordination. But so few show readiness to adjust the practices which have brought us into the fragmentation and confusion we are in.

The UN will now also set up a new “peer-review” mechanism. The purpose will be to bring donors within certain priority areas together to ensure that they are not duplicating, but complementing each other, and that they have a strategic perspective in accordance with the plans of the Afghan Government. This initiative has the full support of the Afghan Government and has been welcomed by donors.

I have mentioned the need to focus more on capacity – and institution-building, which is one of our priorities. It is the most important element in building Afghanistan and it is the most important element of an international exit strategy. It has worked well in building the Afghan army and it is starting to work well in building the police. Why is it so?

Primarily because there are national programmes. It is not enough to send more people. So often we have seen how a supply –based instead of a need-based approach has failed. Often I have wondered whose capacity is being built – the capacity of the foreign expert or the Afghan institutions.

I firmly believe that a massive capacity – and institution-building effort is required. It must be at the top of our priorities. It includes ensuring that capacity – building is an integrated part of every development project, a more strategic approach to education and the

building of institutions at a national and sub-national level; the security institutions, the judicial institutions, ministries and provincial and district administrations.

But success will depend on the following:

We must formulate a national vision and national programs. A fragmented and piecemeal approach will not work.

Programmes should include qualified people, the technical assets required and financial resources.

Afghan ownership should be ensured.

Capacity-building should, where possible, include both training and mentorship.

Capacity – and institution-building is not the kind of activity that lends itself to ribbon-cutting events or to photo opportunities. But it is the most critical element in enabling Afghans to run their own affairs.

Let me illustrate why I insist on more strategic and long-term thinking.

Recently I had a meeting with the two Ministers of Education and of Labour and Social Affairs. They told me that soon millions of young girls and boys will come out of their secondary education. That is good news. But there is very limited capacity to absorb them into higher education. Only 4 per cent find their way to technical vocational schools. If this is not soon corrected, Afghanistan will not be able to make use of its intellectual resources and the potential for economic growth will be significantly limited. The private sector will not have qualified and educated people.

The readiness of donors to provide primary education is encouraging. One country is building 200 primary schools in “its” province. But the neighbouring provinces lack anything like the same generosity. And resources for higher education and vocational training in the same provinces are scarce.

This is a time for strategy and policy reviews. I welcome such reviews and believe that they can re-energize our common efforts at a critical moment.

However, I would also emphasize that we have set priorities. And we have agreed on them – in Paris and elsewhere. The main problem is our limited readiness to implement what we have agreed on, to be flexible enough to respond to changes and to have a strategic, nationwide perspective in our work.

I have touched on our human rights mandate in terms of civilian casualties and the election process. Allow me to mention two other areas that have our full attention; the rights of women in Afghan society and freedom of expression.

I have been disturbed by recent reports of violence against women and brutal rape cases. The mission is speaking out consistently against such phenomena and the marginalization of women in Afghan society, against the prevailing atmosphere of impunity, the lack of access to the court system and to adequate health facilities.

Afghanistan is today the only country in the world where the average life expectancy for women is lower than for men.

And we are speaking out to promote the education of women and their ability to take part in the Afghan society. This is a matter of human rights. But it is also a matter of making full use of the entire Afghan population in building the country. Afghanistan cannot afford to keep half of its population marginalized. There are women in prominent positions today. But they are few. Many more are required to serve as role models for the young female population and enable them to use their resources for the benefit of their country.

We have also constantly raised cases relating to the freedom of expression, which is always important but even more when an election campaign is approaching.

When I last spoke to the Security Council, I was deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation and the prospects of starvation in many parts of the country. That danger has not passed. But so far the winter has not brought the humanitarian crisis that many of us feared. The prospects for the next harvest seem to be better than last year. In the middle of April we will be able to assess the situation and the prospects better than we are today.

Over the next few months, there will be several conferences focusing on regional dimension of our work. I welcome this wider focus. And I hope that the various conferences can be prepared in a way that turn them into a process rather than a series of separate events.

The improved relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is encouraging. None of us underestimate the challenges and the need to support this improved relationship – as illustrated by the appointments of so many special envoys for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The potential for regional cooperation is impressive. It ranges from huge infrastructure projects bringing the wider region together to smaller-scale cooperation in agriculture. The meeting in Paris in December last year served to mobilize the attention and interest of donors. As a follow up to the Paris meeting, experts met in Brussels two days ago to identify priority projects in preparation of the regional economic cooperation conference in Islamabad. We are, I believe, moving from the declaratory phase to an operational phase. Already, the new electricity supply from Uzbekistan to Kabul and other cities in Afghanistan is a visible sign of the value of regional cooperation.

I am convinced that in economic cooperation as well as capacity-building, all neighbouring countries could play a significant role. For instance; agricultural experts from neighbouring countries know Afghanistan, they speak the languages and they are familiar with the climate. And they are certainly less expensive than western experts. They represent significant untapped resources in the region that should be mobilized. Mr. President, I have always insisted that military means cannot alone bring an end to the conflict. A political process will ultimately be needed. However, we should not believe that such a process of reconciliation can be a shortcut to peace or a replacement for other efforts to build Afghanistan. Reconciliation is not a substitute, but the indispensable final component.

Furthermore, a peace process will never succeed if the government and the international community do not have confidence in themselves. We must address reconciliation in a way that projects strength and conviction and not weakness and doubt. If we do not have confidence in ourselves then the Afghan people will not have confidence in us and in their own future. That would damage any reconciliation process.

Mr. President, in a few days time we – and many more – will meet in The Hague. It will not be a donor conference. It will be a political manifestation of support and commitment. My wish is that The Hague conference will provide new energy and a shared readiness – not to re-examine our agreed priorities, but to demonstrate readiness to implement them and use our resources in a flexible and coordinated way. For me The Hague Conference is a test of political will. It is an occasion for us to push the doom and gloom atmosphere aside, roll up our sleeves and support the positive trends that we now see emerging in Afghanistan.

And let us all avoid an impression that we are discussing what to do about Afghanistan. We must discuss what we can do together with the Afghans. If they feel that a debate is going on out there somewhere about them – and not with them – then it will deeply offend their sense of dignity and ownership. The sense of ownership is critical; to the strength of the government in the eyes of its public, to its confidence in itself and – ultimately – for our success on defeating the insurgency.