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**Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan
Kai Eide**

In the report from your Defence and Security Committee on Afghanistan, the question is raised if 2009 will be a turning point in Afghanistan. It is a question I have asked myself many times. In any case, we cannot and should not expect dramatic shifts. Often it is hard to identify the turning point when we are in the middle of events. It is easier to look back and say that this was the year when trends started to shift decisively.

There are very positive trends that we must reinforce. I will come back to some of them. At the same time we are entering another difficult fighting season. And we are entering the campaign season for Presidential and Provincial elections. It is certainly not an optimal combination. But if we can manage to strengthen the positive work now underway, and implement what we have agreed on, if additional troops can bring the insurgency on the defensive and if we can hold elections that have the credibility required to be accepted by the population at large, then 2009 could well be a turning point. That is a lot of 'ifs', you may say. Yes, but it is doable.

Let me start with some of the positive trends that require all the support we can mobilize. They are quite a few, but they are often overshadowed by more dramatic events on the battlefield and by initial phases of the election process.

We have complained for years about the critical lack of an effective police force; a police which can stabilize areas where the military have pushed the insurgency back; a police force which can rid itself of corruption and drug abuse; and which can earn the trust of the population.

Now, the Ministry of Interior has a new and determined leadership. After half a year of hard work, the new investment of energy and attention is giving results. Last month a decision was made to increase the police force by 15,000. That will be followed by a larger increase later this year. New training centres are being set up. I visited one of them in the Dutch PRT in Uruzgan last month. And I was impressed by what I saw.

Work is finally underway to weed out corruption from the police force. A significant number of police officers have been dismissed. Some are under prosecution. Illegal road tolls set up by the police are being dismantled. New and stricter appointment policies are being adopted. It is a broad reform program. But in a country where literacy courses and drug tests are indispensable parts of any police training programme dramatic changes

will not come overnight. And the police is still losing almost 5 officers every day in clashes with and attacks by the insurgents.

The Afghan National Army continues to improve. Last year, it was in the lead in 62 per cent of all combined operations. The previous manpower ceiling of 86,000 was reached last February, 10 months ahead of schedule. With the current pace of the recruitment and training, the new ceiling of 134,000 could be reached early in 2011 – two years ahead of plans. However, strengthening the army depends on more than manpower. It will also require the timely delivery of weapons and equipment.

There is one other important change in the security area: the team itself, including Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence, the Intelligence Service and National Security Council now works much better together. As one consequence, the level of violence in the capital has gone down significantly. There and elsewhere terrorist networks are uncovered before they can carry out their deadly attacks. Yes, new, more sophisticated and dramatic attacks can happen any day. But in general the capital is much safer than it was last year.

And then on the economic side of government work:

The Ministry of Agriculture - also neglected for years – has been reinvigorated. In April, the Minister launched a broad national framework programme aimed at boosting production, developing markets and increasing employment. It was the first such framework programme presented in years and it was enthusiastically embraced by donors.

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has, under new leadership, presented its priorities for private sector development. Hopefully, this will also soon be turned into a broader programme.

The new Minister of Finance has increased revenue collection significantly following years of complaints by donors. Before summer, he will present his anti-corruption plan with very specific measures, including specific requests for assistance from the international community will be needed.

And finally, the positions of Minister of Finance, Senior Economic Advisor to the President and co-chair of the joint coordination body between the Afghan and the international community has been brought together in the hand of one person – the Minister of Finance – thereby hopefully ensuring more coherent and effective Afghan policies and improving prospects of coordination.

The economic team also works better together as was demonstrated last month when the Minister of Finance took the lead in developing an Afghan response to the calls for a “civilian surge” – capacity and institution-building in civilian areas – within two weeks. That would not have been possible half a year ago. It is a plan, which should now be the basis for our common work in this area.

Finally, let me add another positive element; the prospects for 2009 indicate a very significant decrease in poppy production and a further increase of poppy free provinces. I say indicate because it is still a prognosis. In August / September we will know more. But what we see is now a trend and not only a one-year drop in production. Poppy production is no longer an Afghanistan-wide phenomenon, but a problem related to a

smaller number of provinces in the South. If we can now stand firmly in support of new alternative livelihood programmes, then I hope we can consolidate this positive trend. We have talked about this for so long. But too little has been done.

Last year, I said that we have to get beyond the early success stories of number of boys and girls at school and coverage of basic health care. People – in Afghanistan and the international community – expected more. They expected progress in fighting corruption, in combating crime, in counter-narcotic work, in improving rule of law and food security. What we now see of positive trends address precisely these concerns. It will take years before we see the progress we seek. But there is a new momentum.

This momentum is primarily due to new Afghan Ministers in a number of Ministries. However, it is also due to strong international support. The International presence - civilian and military – is yielding results. Further progress will depend both on competent Afghan leadership and constant international support.

The UN has – together – with the Afghan government and the donors – set a number of priorities for our coordination efforts; agriculture and its infrastructure, energy, private sector development, capacity – and institution – building and, finally, higher education and vocational training. It is a cluster of interrelated topics aimed at creating more stable institutions and economic growth. The challenge now is for all of us to adapt our development programmes to these priorities and not continue on auto pilot. We have to reshape our engagement to support positive trends and Afghan priorities. It seems so obvious. Yet, it is so difficult. I will come back to this in a moment.

It is important that you, members of parliaments, who decide on the sending of troops and allocation of resources – year after year – are fully aware of these positive trends. It is not true that little has been achieved in 7 years. And it is not true that we are in a period of stagnation with no good news coming out of Afghanistan.

I am not trying to point a rosy picture. The struggle will continue to be very much uphill. But unless we see the positive trends, we will not be able to provide timely and critical support. And the result will be more resignation, more doom and gloom, which in the end may well turn out to be self-fulfilling.

The fighting season never really stopped due to mild winter, but we have now entered the most intensive months of fighting. We have to acknowledge that the fighting in several provinces has been hard, and that the overall number of casualties and security incidents has gone up compared to the same period last year. The number of foreign fighters seems to have increased and the impact of the situation in neighbouring Pakistan remains a serious source of instability. However, on the military side it is also a mixed picture and a picture which in part is different from that of last year.

Last summer, the impression was that Kabul was surrounded and the insurgents ready to enter the capital. It was wrong then and it is certainly wrong now. There was then an increasing pressure on provinces immediately surrounding Kabul, such as Wardak and Logar. This pressure is not apparent now. And the capital is much calmer than it was last summer and autumn. The same seems to apply to Herat in the West.

In the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, the fighting continues to be intensive. And it has become more intense in some of the provinces neighbouring

Pakistan, such as Khost and Kunar. In the North – East we have seen the insurgency trying to demonstrate that it can create instability also in provinces that have so far been stable. Overall, the numbers of suicide attacks and IEDs have increased. However, the number of IEDs discovered before they are detonated has also gone up.

One of the big questions is whether we will now see a crescendo of insurgency activities in the period before elections. The signals are mixed. Over the last days and weeks, convoys with election material have gone to each and every province – without any security incidents. And we certainly cannot today assess what the impact of 20,000 additional international forces and several thousand Afghan troops will have on the fighting season leading up to the elections.

I firmly believe that these new international troops are required, to fight the insurgency, train additional Afghan troops and help secure the elections. But – and this is to me a critical point; we must make sure that an increase in the number of international troops does not lead to an increase in civilian casualties and in behaviour that offends and alienates the Afghan public.

In accordance with my human rights mandate, I have spoken out and will continue to speak out whenever necessary to address these problems. My objective is not to harm the international military presence, rather the contrary; to make sure that this presence is sustainable – for as long as it may be needed. Because there is no doubt that every such instance of civilian casualties, of mistaken identity or culturally unacceptable behaviour – undermines the support for international troops in the Afghan public. And according to recent opinion polls, that support has gone down in the areas where the most intensive fighting has taken place.

However, let me emphasize some fundamentals:

First, most civilian casualties stem from the activities of the Taliban and other terrorist groups. For them it is not a question of tragic mistakes, but of deliberate policies. They aim at civilians.

Second, the outgoing commander, General David McKiernan has done excellent work in trying to reduce the number as much as possible. The relationship between the international military and – for instance the UN Mission – has improved tremendously during his term in Kabul. There is today an openness and a daily dialogue we have never seen before.

Third, it is not so that the UN and the international military disagree every time there is an incident of civilian casualties. Sometimes we agree, but it never attracts the attention of the media. Sometimes we disagree strongly – as we did after a tragic incident in the Shindand district in Herat province last August where 90 civilians lost their lives due to the use of air power.

Early this month, a serious fighting took place in the Gerani village in Farah province between the Taliban and Afghan and international forces. The Afghan government claimed that 140 civilians were killed, mostly as a result of air bombardment. Others have also presented high numbers of civilian deaths. I am not able to subscribe to any of these figures. After a lengthy assessment, I am simply not ready to provide a definite

view of what happened on the ground, on how many civilians were killed and how were responsible. I want to be on firm ground. This time I was not.

Nonetheless, I must express a strong and general concern. With 20,000 additional troops coming in, there is a need to review the use of air power in populated areas and to exercise the greatest caution possible. There is a need to review the operations of special forces to avoid behaviour that offends Afghan cultural sensitivities and reduces the risk of lives lost because of false intelligence or mistaken identities. And there is a tremendous need to prepare and train soldiers at each and every level so that existing and new directives are observed on the ground.

So this is my appeal to the incoming commander. We can lose the people without losing on the battlefield. The costs of mistakes are tremendous – in terms of innocent lives, but also in terms of loss of support – in the Afghan public and in the public of troop contributing countries. We must maintain the broad multinational military engagement we have today. But that broad engagement will depend on the level of support we enjoy from the Afghan people.

Let me return to the elections. The bad news is that there have been irregularities in most provinces during the registration process, including multiple registrations and an over-representation of women. The good news is that it is reparable and that the IEC is undertaking mitigating measures, for instance in its recruitment process and through disciplinary action in preparation of the election campaign and the election day itself. I believe that we will be able to hold elections in August that are credible and that are acceptable to the population at large. Acceptable in the Afghan context. And let us remember that this is a society where the literacy rate for women in some provinces may be 2 per cent and for men sometime not much higher.

Obviously, there is more cynicism now than in 2004 and 2005 with regard to what elections can bring. Expectations have not been fulfilled. There is disappointment of lack of progress. But this is not a uniquely Afghan phenomenon. On the contrary, it is unfortunately a frequent phenomenon in societies with young democratic institutions in conflict or post-conflict situation. One of our most critical tasks is to do our best to ensure that the people continue to believe in the value of participation. Therefore, a solid public outreach programme is so important.

I would also like to underline that it is the Afghan that are responsible for preparing and holding these elections. The international community takes part in a supporting role. So far, the IEC has managed well in sticking to a tight timetable.

As we approach election day, two other elements will be of great importance. The first is the security situation. I have already touched upon this aspect. So far, the insurgency has abstained from attacking registration centres or election related activities. What the next three months will bring in this respect we simply do not know.

The second is the level playing field. The credibility of the elections will be greatly and positively affected if the opposition cannot legitimately claim that government institutions were used to favour a candidate. President Karzai has now issued a non-interference decree. We will watch attentively to see that it is respected by all. And I have issued a set of guidelines for conduct during the election process that we in the international community will use as a basis for constant assessment of the process.

Then, of course, comes the question of what happens after the elections. To me, the most important is that the Afghan people can see that this is a society moving forward and that the government provides hope. And it is important that the partnership between the Afghan government and the international community can be sustained.

Over the last few months, new, younger and competent ministers have – as I have mentioned - been put in charge of key ministries. I would like to see this process reinforced. We do not need more of the old warlords in power, but fewer. We need more competent politicians who can turn the clock forward and provide stability and prosperity. In this I firmly believe that I speak for vast majority of the Afghan people and for the entire international community. This is the only way to maintain the crucial partnership between the Afghan people and the people of those countries who send their soldiers and invest of their resources in Afghanistan.

Briefly, let me offer some comments on topics that are of great concern to me as the senior international civilian in Afghanistan.

Let me start with donor coordination. We are doing better – much better. But I continue to have serious concerns.

First, we must all review our assistance programmes to make sure that they correspond to new priorities. Much too often I experience resistance to change among international donor bureaucracies. It is not so that we lack a roadmap. We lack readiness to follow the roadmap. The priorities have been set, but it is not reflected in the way development programmes are implemented. There is a denial syndrome or an auto pilot syndrome, which basically says that everything we do is within the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS). And that may well be true, since the ANDS covers everything. But the Paris conference last June and The Hague conference this March set priorities. Now we have to address these priorities, just as the Afghan government has. I understand the need for predictability in our assistance; however we need to balance this with a sufficient degree of flexibility and readiness to respond quickly.

Second, I would like to see the role of private contractors and PRTs in development work reduced wherever possible. Private contractors are focused more on how to spend much money in a short period of time rather than how to create the best impact of every dollar over the longer term. PRTs should, wherever possible, not increase their own civilian engagement, but reduce it where they can and leave it to others civilian actors. We do not need to increase the civilian capacity of PRTs - who will leave – but increase the capacity of the Afghans – who will stay. The more PRTs take on civilian tasks, the more they will become entrenched. That would affect any healthy exit strategy in a negative way.

Third, I would like to see more – and not less – countries taking a nation-wide instead of a province-wide perspective. We need an equitable distribution of resources in order to;

alleviate poverty in financially underprivileged provinces;
avoid a situation where instability spreads to stable provinces because of insufficient attention, and;
provide incentives to growth centres that can generate economic development – and they are mostly in stable parts of the country.

The recent call for a “civilian surge” – an increase in civilian capacity – and institution-building – is a very positive development. I have for almost a year called for a massive institution-building programme. However, this programme must be built on what Afghans need and not on what we believe they need. It cannot only be at the sub-national level. We also need to strengthen institutions at the national level to provide the tools any President and any government of any country needs to bring a country forward. It must not be a civilian surge provided by men in uniform. And it must be a truly multinational programme, including Europeans – and in particular regional expertise. There is a significant untapped pool of resources in the region itself. Here are experts who know the language, the culture, and the climate. They are cheaper and will stay when experts from far away will leave. But to make use of this resource will require financial support.

I welcome the new energy provided by the US Administration. But we need more than American resources and personnel. The Europeans must continue to participate fully. Our engagement in Afghanistan must remain a broad multinational engagement. We should not allow it to become a more exclusively US engagement. That will require full readiness by the US to bring Europeans fully on board in policy formulation. And it will require constant European support and participation in the implementation of common policies. I hope that the newly created group of Special Envoys will bring us all closer in policy formulation and implementation, that it will improve coordination and not complicate it further, and that it will represent a tool of access for me and others on the ground to mobilize political support in capitals.

And finally, we must above all avoid a situation where the Afghans feel that we are shaping a strategy without their full involvement. 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. That 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 and bringing an end to the conflict.