

UNAMA**United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan**

Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit, Kabul, Afghanistan

Transcript<http://unama.unmissions.org>**TRANSCRIPT****PRESS BRIEFING BY UNITED NATIONS DEPUTY SPECIAL
REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
NICHOLAS HAYSOM****(near-verbatim; edited for clarity)****Kabul – Monday, 31 March 2014**

Nicholas Haysom: Overall, our assessment is that the elections are particularly advanced in regard to the adequacy of the preparations, certainly more advanced than they had been in the previous elections.

We've noted that the general framework for the elections is in a much better place than it's been before. The logistics planning and execution is right on target. We've noted really quite important improvements in the management of the vote, the management of the polling centres, the management of the ballots and the voting arrangements, including the quality of the indelible ink.

There have been question marks raised about whether there will be sufficient international observers to guarantee the fairness of the elections or the integrity of the elections. In our view, it was never contemplated that international observers would play a significant role in observation.

In fact, observation rests principally or, in fact, entirely, on domestic observers. It would be better to look at the state of preparedness and organization of domestic observers to make an adequate prediction on observation. There are, as I said, positive signs that the domestic observers are working together and that the authorities will do their best to ensure what is most important: that the observers get out of the cities and into the rural areas.

The final polling centre list has been made available. We understand that there may be further centres closed, closer to the day, more particularly as the electoral administration staff assesses the accessibility of certain areas. What is important; and I think the arrangements are in place to effectively control voting centres which [inaudible] as open and have received sensitive materials – 'sensitive materials' is a sort of code name for ballots – and then close.

Security, of course, we can't predict, but really significant steps have been taken to beef up security in comparison to the previous election, and that relates both to the operational planning, the coordination of information and the numbers of ANSF which will be available to protect voting centres. That in itself, we know, is not a guarantee and we are going to have to wait and see what will happen on voting day. On

the negative side, we know that the Taliban have made a very explicit and express threat to disrupt it, and for that reason, it will be a challenge to them to disrupt it and the failure to disrupt the elections will mean that they will have egg on their face after the elections.

So the stakes are quite high in regard to this. We think it's very important to reassure the Afghan public that steps have been put in place – much better steps than were there before. But, at the end of the day, we know that individuals will make their own mind up about whether that's an adequate reassurance.

We think the political environment is positive. We think the campaign is being conducted in a mature and even-tempered way, that there has not been a degree of personal animosity and spite in the electoral campaign which one must expect elsewhere. We noted and Afghans have considerably greater interest in the actual campaigns and people's positions, in the political debates, than we've probably ever seen in Afghanistan before. The challenge for us is to translate some of that enthusiasm into a real opportunity to vote.

We ourselves have and continue to appeal to candidates to give a lead on the behaviour which they expect their supporters, or they expect other people's supporters, to comply with. We think they also have an important role to play in giving a signal as to how the results are accepted.

There will be losers, particularly if there are a limited number of front-runners as it were. We know that there is only space for two, as it were, in the final race. So, there will be some disappointed candidates as well as supporters of those candidates.

It's critical, we think, that candidates give a lead that they, at the end of the day, accept the result provided the reassurances given that their complaints are being properly handled and that there hasn't been widespread and undetected fraud.

I should mention this observation: the last election produced a result which was quite – as commentators say – fraud-free because all the fraud was detected and excised. We don't really want that to happen, and we see that the primacy should be in preventing fraud rather than going through an exercise to remove tainted ballots.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

REUTERS: What's your assessment of the Afghan election monitors? How well are they prepared and trained to detect fraud in an impartial and objective way?

Nicholas Haysom: [Inaudible]... my observation based on hearsay, but I think the question is an important one because a lot of us have put so much emphasis on the number of observers and not on the quality of observers.

What I can say is that Afghan domestic observers have had practice and experience and the quality of their observation mission management is high. They have had considerable input, not just for this election, but in the previous elections. And I would want to believe that that would translate, through their training, to their individual domestic observers. So we are quite confident. We also note that some of the international NGOs have spent quite a lot of time in the training, and in training the trainers, to improve the quality of observation. Having said that, I just again make the point that I think observers have an important role to play, not merely in observation for the purposes of an eventual certification or pronouncement on the integrity, but they also have an important role to play by just being present, by being eyes on the ground.

The Guardian: I know you sort of touched upon this... I just want to know that, on-the-record, that some of the candidates, given the rather negative tone to the race, by saying if they lose it is fraud, and you

said also, in the past, that there will be fraud, some level of fraud, and the important thing is to have better elections [inaudible] with results that are accepted – would you say that now?

Nicholas Haysom: Yes, I think most of the candidates have confided that they do not expect an absolutely fraud-free election. What they want to know is that the results reflect the will of the people. So the question will focus on how extensive is that fraud and whether it impacts on the result and whether it is capable of being excised. And I think that is what we have to reassure them on, but, in my view, we want to have an election which is manifestly better than the last election, which means less fraud. On the other question you raised, I am not going to say that it has been a prominent part of certain candidates' campaigns, that they have threatened that if they are not elected it is an indication of fraud. We have spoken to some of the candidates about this. We think, unfortunately, by talking in these terms you undermine the Afghan electoral institutions. Certainly one of the important products of the elections should be electoral institutions which are stronger, in which Afghans have greater faith and so on. And I think that the electoral institutions have made some headway, because frankly there was quite some cynicism about them original, and I think some people were not prepared to accept their role.

Wall Street Journal: Just quickly... Can you explain your own your benchmarks on the question of turnout. What do you define as a good turnout? Just further to that, I have just spent a couple of days visiting registration centres. People are saying that they are massively crowded that it has been a last-minute rush, and that they haven't been able to get in to register. How big the problem [inaudible] on resources?

Nicholas Haysom: I do not know how much of a problem it has been in absolute terms, that there has been this last-minute rush to register. I also have received complaints that people had been queuing for hours and sometimes of not being able to register in the day that they arrived.

In a sense it is heartening that there is this late surge and interest. But I wouldn't be able to put an absolute figure on it. Bear in mind that this registration exercise is a top-up exercise. It is only registration for those who have lost their cards, turned eighteen or have returned from exile. But I would imagine that there would be a lot of people, particularly women, who didn't register the last time and now want to register. I understand that they are intending to keep the voter registration centers open until two days before the election day, and the election authorities have attempted to respond by onstantly delaying the closure of these centres.

Follow-up question: Just [inaudible] on the question of turnout?

Nicholas Haysom: [Inaudible] on the question of turnout? My own?

Follow-up question: Yes, what would disappoint you?

Nicholas Haysom: I think what would disappoint me is a figure somewhere in the region of the last election.

New York Times: How are you going to assess or measure disenfranchisement? How are you looking at "ghost" polling stations? What kind of plans are there to gauge enfranchisement? [Inaudible]

Nicholas Haysom: It is an important part of the previous question. I think when we look at turnout we look at two things: we look at how many people came to vote, but also where they came to vote. We do that because one of the aspects of the last election which undermined the legitimacy of the results was the feeling, in some communities, that they were denied the opportunity because there were no stations open or threatened and didn't vote and so, particularly in Afghanistan, in a way more than in any other country, accessibility is as important as global turnout.

So we have to measure where people vote as well and get a sense of province by province that communities were able to vote. And also, you know, that within provinces, that communities within

provinces can vote, a classic situation being that of Ghazni in the last elections in which it was suggested that only Hazaras were provided the opportunity to vote and Pashtuns were disenfranchised.

Deutsche Presse-Agentur: Do you know how many voting cards are floating right now and how much of that excessive number of voting cards could contribute to fraud, and also how many ballots have been printed?

Nicholas Haysom: We understand on the calculations that have been very clear right from the start, that about 15 million ballot papers have been printed and that is based on issuing every voting station with exactly the same number of ballots, which is 600. That was a decision taken early on, based on an overall experience, the sort of judgment on what was necessary to provide enough ballots for a voting station in the context that in Afghanistan, like many other places in the world, everyone can vote everywhere. So you cannot, unfortunately, just send the right number of ballots to the voting station based on some sort of voting list for that polling centre and, obviously, that is where Afghanistan has to move in future elections.

On the voting cards, nobody knows and there are figures and gossips – some people say up to 18 million for a voting population which some people say is maybe as much as 12 million. But we don't think voting cards in themselves necessarily imply fraud and excess of voting cards. Fraudulently-obtained cards have to be exercised together with other mechanisms including very often the complicity of election officials. And in general the practice has not been for people to acquire multiple voting cards for the purpose of voting twice.

Xinhua: I have two questions, first one is yes or no, that is easy. It is about "ghost" ballots, as I heard there might be some "ghost" ballots which the voters are getting [INAUDIBLE]. My second question is about the power transition, as you said, after the election there will be one winner... If this time power could not be peacefully transferred, I am wondering if that could be a political crisis, and does UNAMA have any preparations to do something if this kind of [INAUDIBLE].

Nicholas Haysom: If, after the elections there are disputes between the candidates to as who has won, first, there is an election machinery, which is supposed to resolve these disputes, but there is also the very Afghan practice of engaging one another in discussion on how to resolve the crisis, and I am sure those are the discussions which Afghans will conduct, and certainly bodies like the UN will be willing to assist in providing venues for those or promoting those discussions. But I don't think we can say now that there is going to be a crisis because people won't accept the results.

Bear in your mind also, for your own planning, that the assessment of many observers is that there will be two rounds – of course we don't know that for certain, I am not predicting that it would be, but most people seem to believe that, because of the [inaudible] candidates, it will require two votes.

So the first round may not be a decisive election of a new leader. It may be a preliminary step towards another election and that gives you the opportunity of adjusting expectations, and adjusting what is at stake.

I don't know about "ghost" ballots. As far as we are concerned there are no "ghost" ballots, they are really ballots. Every ballot is boxed to its voting centre, so people cannot manufacture ballots and vote in secret and suddenly slip them into the counting process. We do not discount a particular area, maybe someone opens their polling centre early so that people can vote in the dark or I don't know – but we do know that the election authorities envisaged phoning when you open your centre; there are going to be photographs of opening polling centres; you are going to phone when you are closing your polling centre, the voting centre is closed at four [o'clock], it is quite controlled.

New York Times: Can you confirm the statistics of security incidents this year compared to last year?

Nicholas Haysom: Let me just share with you that in the equivalent period, [inaudible] before the elections, the security incidents are between nine and 25 per cent down – I have heard both figures. And our own rough take on assessing security incidents over the period in 2009 also indicates that there has

been a significant reduction at this stage. What there has been, of course, is an increase in incidents in Kabul, which I think has overloaded the picture from the international community in this perspective. I don't know whether this had the same [inaudible] become the dominant prism through which rural Afghans are viewing security. But to be sure we have heard areas where there is considerable insecurity there are treats being made to members of the public and night letters are being issued.

Follow-up question: Can I just scroll down those figures – I mean if you are comparing with 2009 and 2014, things might look a little bit better, but they have gotten worse after 2009, so we are not getting [inaudible] previous one.

Nicholas Haysom: Yes, but the figure is, we are better from what used to be a much better spot. We use to be a spot where, I think, got constantly worse of 2009. Civilian casualties has got worse; we have dropped, there has been a very significant drop.

Follow-up question: But last year was the worst year for civilian casualties?

Nicholas Haysom: Yes, we are not talking about civilian casualties – we are talking about security incidents. You are quite right, it is more complex, because security incidents are not a reflection of election-related violence. A lot of security incidents, arguably even in the Serena Hotel are not election-related. We have had at least one campaign coming to see us about violence in which they estimate a minority of incidents to be related to the Taliban. So some of the election-related violence is judged by the candidates, or by some of the candidates, to emanate from different political forces or rivals. Quite hard to unpick (inaudible) when you are trying to record the statistics.

Associated Press: Can you talk about the attack on IEC [Independent Election Commission] headquarters and confirm what was in their warehouse? That there were ballot papers for a run-off?

Nicholas Haysom: Not ballot papers as such, but some of what are called non-sensitive materials relating to the run-off. Non-sensitive material is normally ballot boxes, inks, the stuff that they circulate usually well in advance of the election, and they only distribute sensitive material later. This was only the non-sensitive material. They obviously had not printed the ballots for the run-off; I hope they haven't printed the ballots for the run off at this stage.

New York Times: [Inaudible]

Nicholas Haysom: It should be mentioned the coalition forces had almost no part in the direct security arrangements of the last election. They were principally involved in the logistical part of the operation which is the...

Follow-up question: [Inaudible]

Nicholas Haysom: They may be in conducting operations but they did not play a part in election-related [security], securing the sites for the election-related activities, that is what I am told. I was not here then. So in both elections it was left entirely to the ANSF [Afghan National Security Forces] and that is something has been significant increase in the size up to the Chicago limit. ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], I think, will still play a reserve back-up role on logistics but they don't anticipate having any combat role.

China Central Television: There was reporting earlier this week that the actual election might be suspended in favour of a peace deal with the Taliban and that it means that the incumbent Hamed Karzai will be acting leader [Inaudible].

Nicholas Haysom: That is not a new scenario on which has been speculation. It has been around since I arrived two years ago. Quite frankly, I think that on the election the train has left the station. I find it very hard to see how the elections could be called off at this stage.

Al Jazeera English: You mentioned the run-off a couple of times. Is it your assumption that there will be a run-off?

Nicholas Haysom: Yes, maybe we should and I know I have seen President Karzai rebut foreigners who talk about a run-off, so I don't want to say it would be a run-off – but almost all the commentators that are making [estimates] suggest looking at and making assessments at the level of support of the candidates and the range of candidates; they estimate that it is difficult that any one candidate can be guaranteed a first round winner.

From our perspective, just because we have to do the planning, we have to make assumptions whether it is... what we do with our staff, and so on. Literal support, we are planning for run off because we can't start planning and procuring the equipment [inaudible] after the result comes **out**. The final result is certified literally two weeks before the second round [run off], there is a long period between the first election and that final result it is about six weeks or less, maybe five weeks.

New York Times: (Inaudible)

Nicholas Haysom: I don't know what would be a fiasco, but... and there would be two dimensions almost matching the two important needs for a good election, both the internal and external. They would be the way the results would be seen by Afghans and whether it generated conflicts amongst Afghans or refusal (inaudible) at the results, and the second one would be the view of the international community that the result is not reliable. I think the international community would also be guided, quite frankly, by what Afghans think, so if Afghans were to say we don't accept these results, it certainly affects the international calculations as well.

Deutsche Presse-Agentur: Regarding intimidation and violence at the ground level between different campaigns. We have been hearing about fights and kidnappings between different campaigns. I was wondering if you have words on those?

Nicholas Haysom: No, just to acknowledge that we have heard from the campaigns that not all the violence is Taliban-related that some of the campaigns have experienced; or they have alleged.

Sunday Times: In previous elections, requests were made to the Pakistan Government to restrain any people that they might have any influence over. I wonder if that is happening this time?

Nicholas Haysom: I don't know. I would have it as a guess that all of those who have had engagements with the Pakistan Government have impressed upon it the importance of elections here. We have heard Pakistani officials also recognizing the importance of these elections, but I don't know what that may have translated into.

Daily Telegraph: It seems that the IECC [Independent Electoral Complaints Commission] is going to play a big role in deciding elements of this election (Inaudible).

Nicholas Haysom: I will be quite frank and say that, at the outset, we were concerned about the IECC's capacity even to properly establish itself in the provinces. They have faced a number of logistical challenges, including standing themselves up in hiring staff that they needed and they had to do so at a time in which they were also having to adjudicate on candidate eligibility – which they have done, and they managed to do both. I think they have grown as an institution. Have we seen them work under pressure? No, we haven't yet and I acknowledge that there may be a question mark still.

We don't as yet know what kind of pressure they would be under. But in a difficult scenario there would be thousands of complaints which they will have to adjudicate on within a comparatively short period of time. In my discussions with the Chairperson, I have been quite impressed with their understanding of what the nature of those challenges would be and how they would go about it. It involves a capacity to develop a methodology for treating a vast range of complaints, many of which would be identical, and

many of which would be different, some of which will involve fact-finding and some of which will be unrelated to the elections at all.

Reuters: Do you think that the Taliban, and they have obviously threatened to derail this election but, given their strength, do you think they are capable of achieving this?

Nicholas Haysom: I don't think they will derail the elections. Elections will take place on the 5th. I don't think it could be derailed. It is hard to predict what the level of violence will be on that day. We would hope that it would be contained because we think that would permit and encourage people who want to vote. I don't want to sound naïve and say there won't be some violence on the election day. Simply looking at the growth in incidents on elections day in the previous years indicate that there will be a spike, but I don't think that will be sufficient to impact the elections.