UNAMA
United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
Strategic Communications
Briefing to the Security Council
http://unama.unmissions.org

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

[as delivered]

New York, 15 March 2016

****

Mr. President, Members of the Council,

In 2016, Afghanistan is being as severely tested as it was in 2015, by the task of managing its difficult transition with its interrelated political, economic and security challenges.

To survive 2016, the National Unity Government will need to overcome five distinct hurdles: a contracting economy characterized by low growth and high unemployment; an intensifying insurgency regarded by some as an eroding stalemate; and an increasingly fractious and divided political environment. In addition, Afghanistan will need to secure significant medium-term financial support from the international community at the Warsaw and Brussels conferences this summer. Finally, it will need to achieve progress towards a sustainable peace without which all the other gains are threatened.

For 2016, survival will be an achievement for the National Unity Government. Some may criticize this benchmark as being low. Yet Afghanistan must overcome each and every one of these five hurdles to avoid severe consequences.

Survival does not mean inaction, or treading water; it means active engagement in confronting these challenges.

Mr. President,

On the economic front, we acknowledge that there was a failure to appreciate the shock of the withdrawal of the international community at the end of 2014. In 2012, decisions on the future of Afghanistan assumed the continuation of an annual growth rate of 8 per cent and that the exploitation of Afghanistan's abundant mineral resources would drive economic development. It is now clear, however, that neither would occur. The World Bank now expects low economic growth, off a low base. In addition, the latest weather forecast suggests that some areas of the country may be affected by drought this summer, thereby increasing Afghanistan's humanitarian vulnerabilities.

Low levels of growth have resulted in high unemployment. The hundreds of thousands of young

people seeking to join the work force each year confront the absence of jobs and yet complain of corruption in public and private life. This combination fuels not only the impulse to migration but also lays a foundation for social instability.

This picture is however mitigated by the Government's efforts to implement its reform agenda, as articulated in the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework to create jobs. In 2015, the Government met the International Monetary Fund's goals under the recently concluded Staff Monitored Program as well as domestic revenue collection targets. It avoided the liquidity crises it faced in 2014. And Government has now stated its clear intent and taken preliminary steps to put an end to the pervasive culture of graft in the armed forces, civil service, banking sector and in public-sector procurement.

The Government's engagement with its neighbours, bilaterally and through initiatives such as the Heart of Asia process and RECCA, for the purpose of regional economic integration, has begun to bear fruit, inter alia, with the launch of the TAPI project. These are encouraging but only first steps in a long road towards self-reliance.

Mr. President,

In regard to the security situation, we can expect a difficult fighting season. The Taliban, emboldened by their military successes in Kunduz and elsewhere, will continue to test the Afghan security forces across the country, including as we speak, from Helmand in the south to Baglhan province in the north. Yet in this first year of independent command, the Afghan security forces have largely held their own in the face of continuing high rates of attrition.

The ANDSF is undertaking efforts to adapt and improve. It is absorbing the lessons from Kunduz, and elsewhere, including, we hope, as they relate to the use of armed militias. It is reconstituting its frontline units, concentrating its otherwise thinly spread presence in the field, in order to adopt a more offensive operational posture to prevent insurgents from gaining momentum in advance of the fighting season.

The stakes are high, not least because the loss of a provincial capital, even if temporarily, would have significant repercussions for the National Unity Government's political standing.

On a positive note, since my last briefing, ISIL or Daesh's active presence is confined to a smaller area to the east of the country following operations by Afghan security forces with support from the international military.

Mr. President,

In regard to the political transition, the National Unity Government continues to be subject to criticism on account of the economic and security deterioration even though this is not of its own making. It is being challenged by a fractious political elite, the erosion of a necessary sense of national unity, and consequentially that most precious political commodity, confidence in the future.

In the face of calls for reviewing the current political framework, the United Nations and the international community have made it clear to all stakeholders that it stands firmly behind the National Unity Government. We can even positively report that, despite delays in effective decision-making, the Government has now appointed an Attorney General and a Minister of Interior. A number of key posts, however, remain to be filled.

Electoral reform is important for the National Unity Government to indicate manifest progress in democratisation and fulfil its commitments it made to the population in 2014. The announcement of a 15 October election date has brought some clarity, but for real progress what is required is the introduction of electoral reforms and the standing-up of the election management bodies.

The United Nations has made it clear that it expects Afghans to take these decisions expeditiously and on the basis of the broadest consensus. We can report that the Government has finally issued a decree establishing a new Selection Committee to nominate Independent Election Commissioners only this week. Yet the urgency to complete preparations remains and the failure to undertake these preparations will have political consequences.

Mr. President,

In the coming months, the international community will make critical decisions at Warsaw and Brussels on the level and type of assistance it will continue to provide to Afghanistan. As the country continues to rely on external funding sources for 69 per cent of government expenditures, failure by the international community to pledge a medium-term commitment to Afghanistan will have a devastating impact, both materially and on the levels of confidence of ordinary Afghans.

Because of alternative demands for international attention and resources, donors will need to be assured that their assistance will have a tangible impact. Afghanistan must show, in particular, that it is committed to tackling corruption, making the necessary governance reforms, tackling the illicit economy, and generating confidence in Afghanistan's future. Investment in Afghanistan must be shown to be a better alternative to the costs of integrating immigrants. However, donor expectations of Afghanistan's reform agenda must be realistic, taking into account the formidable challenges facing the country. UNAMA itself will assist donors and government in formulating a joint consensus on this program.

Mr. President,

The final hurdle is progress towards a sustainable peace. Afghan's want peace, they deserve peace, but most importantly they need peace. Without a peace process, the sustainability and viability of all of our efforts, in Brussels, Warsaw, New York, and elsewhere to bring stability and prosperity to Afghanistan will be called into question.

The establishment of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group is a welcome development that has reinvigorated efforts to put a peace process on track. We notably appreciate the efforts of Pakistan to assist in midwifing such talks. A successful peace process will require the support of neighbouring countries and the wider region. As such, and with the increasing regional dimension of terrorism, it will be important for the region to collaborate on a common approach to this shared threat, as well as to act in support of Afghanistan's peace initiatives.

We have called repeatedly, and will continue to call, for nothing less than direct talks between the Taliban and the Afghan Government.

I again met with the Taliban Political Commission last week and reiterated that peace in Afghanistan requires an intra-Afghan dialogue that must, by necessity, involve Taliban and Taliban groups. They however reiterated that they were not yet ready to engage directly with the Government.

The United Nations will continue to energetically engage with all stakeholders offering support, assistance, advice, good offices and supplementary channels of communication.

Whatever the eventual path forward, the United Nations will also encourage the full participation of women in any peace process so as to ensure that women's voices are heard and that their rights are protected.

Mr. President,

Eleven thousand Afghans were killed or injured last year, civilian Afghans, as a result of the conflict. A quarter of these victims were children. We are conscious that behind this figure lies the tragic loss and grief of surviving members of families and communities. It is no longer sufficient for parties to the conflict to make public statements on the need to avoid civilian casualties. They must change the way they conduct the war.

The United Nations has recently expressed its concern at the disturbing pattern of attacks and raids on educational and medical facilities in contravention of international humanitarian standards. We do however welcome the Government's renewed commitment and recent steps to prevent the recruitment of children by parties to the conflict.
Mr. President,

UNAMA welcomes its refreshed mandate adopted by this Council today. And we reassure you of our commitment to the ever more effective discharge of our mandate for the benefit of the people of Afghanistan.

Thank you.

***