

Security Council Open Debate on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 12th February, 2014, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Tanin, Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations

I am pleased to see you preside over the Security Council this month, Madam President. I would also like to thank you for convening this important debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

I also express my thanks to Ms. Valerie Amos, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator; Mr. Hervé Ladsous, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations; Ms. Navanethem Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Mr. Yves Daccord, Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross, for their useful briefings today.

The protection of civilians is of paramount importance to the Government of Afghanistan. The Afghan people expected a long-awaited peace when the Taliban regime came to an end following decades of war, unprecedented destruction and loss of life. Yet despite joint stabilization efforts towards peace and security, the suffering of the Afghan people continues. The security situation remains today precarious, and incidents have in fact escalated in intensity since 2009.

Afghan civilians are targeted with guns and bombs by enemies who measure success in terms of the blood spilled and life lost. Women, children, Government officials, journalists, religious leaders and judicial authorities are at risk as they go about their daily lives, shopping at a bazaar, visiting a friend or commuting to work. They are attacked in villages, on public roads, in restaurants, Government offices, courthouses and mosques.

With total and utter disregard for civilian life, the brutal terrorist campaign by the Taliban and other extremist groups affect ordinary Afghans most profoundly. The Taliban are responsible for the overwhelming majority of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, causing thousands of deaths in 2013 alone, which represents a sharp increase from previous years.

The brutal campaign opened a murderous era in Afghanistan's history — devastating in terms both of its acute impact on the Afghan people and of its savagery. Terrorists' tactics are a horrific manifestation of man's inhumanity to man, of which graphic video footage of beheadings posted on Taliban websites, the recent heinous attack on a popular restaurant in Kabul and the cold-blooded murders and violence against women and children are but a few harrowing examples.

The Council condemned Taliban attacks in the strongest terms six times last year, stressing that terrorism in all its forms was criminal and unjustifiable and underscoring the need to bring its perpetrators to justice. It is clear that the Taliban show flagrant disregard for international law as well as the basic tenets and principles of Islam.

We note with deep concern an increase in the indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by armed insurgent groups in the past year. IEDs remain the leading cause of civilian deaths and injuries, accounting for 34 per cent of all civilian casualties in Afghanistan. To address this menace, a national counter-IED strategy was instituted by presidential decree in 2012. We are working to strengthen our counter-IED capabilities and the related training programmes by the International Security Assistance Force for the Afghan National Security Forces — a further important step in minimizing the danger posed by such weapons.

Tragically, ground engagements in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations have resulted in the deaths and injuries of civilians. It is unfortunate that Afghans have lost their lives during operations by international and national forces that aimed to protect them. In that regard, the Afghan Government has repeatedly called on international military forces to take all the necessary measures to stop the loss of Afghan civilian life. Important steps have been taken in that regard in recent years.

With Afghan forces now at the forefront of protecting the Afghan people from terrorist attacks, we see situations in which civilians are caught in the crossfire of ground engagements with the enemy. One life lost is one too many, and, with that sentiment in mind, Afghan forces are strongly committed to the protection of civilians. Stabilization efforts are guided by their sense of responsibility, sobriety and duty to their fellow Afghans.

It is clear that the surest way to protect the lives, honour and dignity of citizens is to end the cycle of violence that harms innocent civilians. In that regard, achieving peace and security in Afghanistan requires the following three key components: first, international assistance throughout the next decade to support the Afghan capacity to counter terrorist campaigns against the Afghan people; secondly, the elimination of terrorist sanctuaries that fuel the cycle of violence; and, thirdly, vigorous pursuit of our Afghan-led peace and reconciliation process, intended to engage those ready to renounce violence and contribute responsibly to their homeland. Effective regional and international cooperation is key to the successful outcome of the process.