

Security Council Open Debate on Afghanistan and UNAMA
20 March 2012, Security Council Chamber

Statement by H.E. Mr Kubiš, Special Representative of the Secretary General and Head of UNAMA

I am very honoured to brief the Security Council for the first time in my new capacity as Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Allow me to give the Council some impressions and findings based on the first two months of my work in that new capacity.

First of all, 10 years after the creation of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, we face a set of ground realities that is very different from those we found at the beginning. The international military presence is gradually transferring full security responsibility in Afghanistan to the Afghan National Security Forces and will finish its current mission by the end of 2014. Efforts continue to make institutions of national and sub-national governance increasingly capable of providing governance, the rule of law, development and social services to the population, in order to ensure their fundamental rights and freedoms. Voices in support of Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation are stronger, both from the various parts of Afghan society and from the region.

The profile and work of the United Nations in Afghanistan must reflect those realities and take full account of the principles and requirements of the transition process. Active support of those positive trends and developments, in partnership with Afghan authorities and society, must be at the very core of the way we work.

During the first two months of my work in Afghanistan, I met Government officials, political leaders and civil society actors in Kabul and the provinces and across the region. Starting with President Karzai, each and every individual offered me a warm welcome. If there was one thing I drew hope from, it was the strong expressions of the desire for peace. The message of the people is clear — it is time to wind down this war.

News about the nascent peace process has prompted a lively debate that needs to be harnessed and fed into constructive policymaking. Under the People's Dialogue supported by UNAMA, Afghans across the country share their vision of and road map for a peace process. The Dialogue also revealed that corruption, lack of justice and abuse of authority are seen by many as the biggest problem facing ordinary people, coupled with a lack of work prospects for the growing urban population of young people.

Another important point I drew from my meetings was a near universal recognition of the value of the United Nations work and a great desire for UNAMA's continued presence.

Finally, I need to mention the recent tragedies that marked my first weeks in Afghanistan. I again offer my condolences and sympathies to the families of all casualties of the recent instances of violence, be it civilian or military. And I applaud the commitment to full accountability.

At the same time, I passionately emphasize the need for non-violent means of protest, even in response to such grave, albeit unintentional mistakes as the recent burning of the Holy Quran. I commend the appeals and actions of the majority of religious leaders and community elders, who ensured that deep anger was expressed at peaceful community gatherings. And I condemn the sermons and appeals of those few who called for violence. They have only brought death and destruction, first and foremost to Afghans.

A series of killings also targeted international troops there to help and train Afghan forces and institutions. This is unacceptable. Such malicious acts have potentially profound implications for these essential efforts, for public support and for the enduring commitment of the international community to assisting Afghanistan and its people.

The United Nations has also been singled out for violence by some. Notably, the UNAMA office in Kunduz was directly attacked, which brought back frightening memories of the seven dear colleagues of ours killed a year ago in similar circumstances in Mazar-e Sharif. The timely actions of the Afghan National Security Forces ensured that no United Nations personnel were hurt, but six persons lost their lives. We regret these losses.

In response, international staff members have been temporarily relocated while security is reassessed. This may have an impact on some programmes in the short term, and local leaders have already issued statements appealing for their return. However, the security of all our staff, national and international, is of critical importance. We continue to work with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and increasingly with the Afghan authorities, to address this. I expect, and indeed request, the support and understanding of the Afghan authorities for our security requirements. They are sine qua non for our continuous work and presence in the country.

Regardless of those recent tragedies, let us not lose perspective. Recent events should not eclipse or overshadow positive trends and developments or push the international community, Afghanistan or the transition process off agreed plans and timetables. The transition so far has been on track and on target, and the Afghan National Security Forces have so far proven that they are up to their tasks. The Chicago summit should firm up these developments and plans by reaching specific and solid commitments. The absence of such commitments would be a setback to the transition and stability in Afghanistan and the region. In looking to the future, we must demonstrate that we have learned from our mistakes of the past.

Transition, however, also encompasses accelerated Afghan leadership, responsibility and accountability in governance, the rule of law, justice, economic development and combating corruption and poverty, to name but a few. Stronger efforts in combating drug production and trafficking are critically important, given the increase in poppy cultivation and opium production and the consequent increased threat to security, stability, development and governance in Afghanistan and the region. Security gains must be supported by progress in these areas to make them and the transition sustainable.

Last year's international conference in Bonn saw commitment to enduring partnership also during the transformation decade beyond the 2014. Mutual commitments need to be respected by both the international community and Afghanistan. The challenge now is to translate political commitments into predictable funding for the national priority programmes, and to define a follow up mechanism for mutual accountability between Government and its partners for the coming decade. Tokyo will provide that opportunity. In the coming months, the Government and its international partners must intensify their engagement to ensure that properly sequenced national priority programmes serve as the basis for strategic public and private funding and the achievement of development outcomes identified by the Government as fundamental to self-reliance.

Long-term support and predictability are further enhanced by a number of comprehensive partnership agreements between Afghanistan and its bilateral partners. This process continues. UNAMA is working consistently for coherent approaches on the part of the international community in support of Afghanistan's development and governance challenges, including as co-chair of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board.

Many of my Afghan interlocutors have placed emphasis on the 2014 presidential polls. Already the focus of intense debate and political mobilization, the leadership change coincides with the planned culmination of the security transfer. Elections are an Afghan process to be managed by independent Afghan electoral management bodies. If the results are to be trusted, the majority of my Afghan partners gave me a clear message — there is a need to strengthen and improve Afghanistan’s electoral process, including electoral reform, in order to increase its sustainability, integrity, transparency and inclusiveness. A United Nations supporting role, at the request of the Afghan authorities, is welcome and, indeed, needed.

The value of UNAMA’s human rights work has been repeatedly emphasized to me by all parties. As confirmed by UNAMA’s impartial tracking and verification of civilian casualties, 2011 was the fifth year in a row that civilian deaths rose. Insurgent tactics of suicide attacks and the use of victim-activated pressure-plate improvised explosive devices account for the majority of this toll. This is unacceptable and contradicts even the publicly declared ban on land mines by anti-Government forces.

Improvements in the condition of Afghan detention centres and a reduction in the torture and mistreatment of detainees are another concrete outcome of our efforts. Both ISAF and Afghan authorities have undertaken measures to address abusive practices in Afghan detention facilities. It is important to build on gains made to date.

In spite of legal and constitutional protections for women, violence against women and girls remains pervasive in Afghanistan. Improvements require the enforcement of laws — notably the law on the elimination of violence against women — that criminalize and penalize violence and harmful practices against women and girls. UNAMA will continue to work to improve protection and to promote the rights of Afghan women, including their participation in public life and peace and reconciliation processes and with regard to equal opportunities in education and employment. Similarly, we will continue our work for the benefit of Afghan children.

Recent months have seen some potentially positive developments in support of peace and reconciliation. To turn that potential into a successful process, efforts must first of all be fully Afghan-led, but also comprehensive and genuinely inclusive and involve representatives of all relevant forces and segments of Afghan society. At the same time, peace should not be achieved at the expense of the basic achievements of the past decade, as confirmed by the Kabul communiqué and the Bonn Conference. In moving towards a peace process, reducing civilian deaths and injuries should be of the highest priority.

A much repeated request has been for UNAMA to continue to support the High Peace Council and generally make use of its good offices and services in support of peace and reconciliation. Many have called for a United Nations role in those nascent processes, and there are different ideas on what form and shape that could take and when.

Support for Afghanistan in the region has gained momentum, as reflected, among other similar efforts, by the recently held trilateral summit at Islamabad between the leaders of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, who spoke in favour of an Afghan-led peace process. I have been particularly impressed with the Afghan leadership of the regionally owned Istanbul process, as well as with how the process is progressing. I also welcome the commitment of the supporting countries. The work currently focuses on seven specific confidence-building measures and on preparations for the Kabul ministerial meeting in June, which will be preceded next week by an important meeting in Dushanbe of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan.

My recent visits to Pakistan, Turkmenistan, India and Iran provided invaluable opportunities for an exchange of views on the support of those countries for Afghanistan and UNAMA. We spoke about opportunities, but I also heard words of strong concern. I would like to thank those countries for the valuable meetings and for their hospitality. One of my top priorities is to ensure greater coherence of United Nations efforts in all areas — pragmatic, operational and policy — and to ensure that our activities are outcome-oriented, transparent and cost-effective. My deputy, Mr. Michael Keating, is working with the entire United Nations system to ensure full United Nations alignment behind a national development strategy and the national priority programmes, which will serve as the basis for the United Nations pragmatic and operational coherence. As Humanitarian Coordinator, he is working with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to promote and provide practical support for an effective response to humanitarian needs, whether as a result of chronic vulnerability, disasters or conflict. Also, decades-long ongoing problems with regard to refugees and internally displaced persons should be addressed on the basis of sustainable solutions that link humanitarian efforts with development.

From the beginning of my work in Kabul, I have been clear that the Mission and the 28 United Nations agencies, funds and programmes present in Afghanistan must work in support of increasing the capacity of Afghan authorities, institutions and systems to meet the needs of the Afghan people. That will also guide my work in the future.