

Speech: Critical issues need to be resolved before October elections in Afghanistan

Thank you very much Mr President. Thank you very to the SRSG and through him could I also thank all the team in UNAMA for the work they do and thank you for reminding us, Special Representative of the Kofi Annan story of the young girl. It is good to be reminded of the human dimension. It's therefore doubly pleasurable to be able to welcome Mr. Bakhtiar for his perspective and also the Afghan Ambassador.

And like other speakers Mr. President I'd like to begin by condemning the recent terrorist attacks, including those in Nangarhar and offering our condolences to all of the families of those killed and wounded. We need to continue all our efforts to support the Afghan forces as they seek to combat those who would destroy communities and destroy the lives of innocent, ordinary Afghan civilians.

This is an important debate Mr. President. It's the last of the quarterly debates before the Parliamentary elections on 20 October, and I'd like to focus on those elections in my remarks today. Mr. Yamamoto has highlighted the challenges of organizing these elections on time and we are very grateful additionally for the work of his team in supporting the Afghan authorities. All political leaders in Afghanistan should work to improve the process, not to undermine it and we call on them to cooperate to this end. At the moment Mr. President, a number of critical issues on the elections remain unresolved.

Firstly, the voter registration list; Election staff in Kabul have put a lot of effort into compiling and verifying the lists of those who've registered to vote. These lists should be published at the local level as early as possible with a proper complaints mechanism to give the Afghan people time to check their details and register any complaints.

Secondly, communications; An effective communications strategy from the election management bodies explaining the progress that's been made and what further efforts are underway is important for the confidence of the Afghan electorate.

Thirdly, the security of voters' election officials and election materials. My government calls on all actors to respect the safety and the lives of civilians who take part in the elections and calls on those actors to refrain from violent disruption. We commend the bravery of the Afghan national defense and security forces for their work, and we know it is a difficult time for them.

We call on those illegally blockading provincial offices of the Independent Electoral Commission to disperse peacefully. Elections are only five weeks

away and it is critical that preparations be allowed to go ahead.

Mr. President turning to wider matters, I had the honour to be the British Ambassador to Afghanistan in 2015 and 2016, so I'd like to say to Mr Bakhtiar and to Ambassador Saikal, I remain an optimist about your beautiful but troubled country. Given what Afghanistan has suffered, given her state of development – she's one of the poorest countries in the world – and given that the main threat to Afghan security comes from insurgents who are supported from outside Afghanistan, I think we are all prepared for this to take a long time. The international community has been prepared for that and has prepared longer term strategies. The Geneva Conference, which a number of speakers have mentioned, will, we believe, be an important moment for the government of Afghanistan to reflect on progress made so far but also to recommit to the necessary reforms. These are required to drive the sustainable and inclusive growth the Afghan people deserve over the remainder of the transformation decade. My government is fully committed to the conference and to playing its part in preparations, which are now underway.

That said Mr. President, it is important that in all the security, economic, human rights and development challenges that the Afghan people face, that all sections of Afghan society and citizenry come together to do the following things: to strengthen good governance; to uphold the rule of law and human rights, including the rights and health rights and education of women and girls; and, above all, to be tolerant.

I arrived in Kabul Mr. President a week after the very sad Farkhunda killing and I have never forgotten the intolerance and brutality that led to that sad outcome. Afghans' communities need to invest in the future. They need to tackle corruption at all levels, and they need to engage in the economic liberalisation necessary to attract foreign direct investment, and they need to make tangible progress with their regional partners on regional cooperation.

Mr. President we heard from the Afghan Ambassador and from the SRSB about the peace process with Pakistan. We wish that well. I think it goes without saying that peace is the only viable way forward for Afghanistan. We very much support the national unity government in their efforts in this regard. We hope that all other states will do their utmost to support the government. The temporary cease fire that President Ghani brought about was a very important moment and it is regrettable that the Taliban have not responded to his subsequent offers. The Taliban need to demonstrate that they really do have the heart of Afghanistan as their main concern and their concern is for the people of Afghanistan and they need to respond positively to the important offers made by President Ghani in February. Thank you Mr. President.