

UN official sees 'unprecedented opportunities' to make progress on peace in Afghanistan

The coming months will present critical opportunities for the international community to review assistance to Afghanistan, as the country works towards a lasting peace, stable democracy and self-reliance, the top United Nations official there told the Security Council in New York on Tuesday.

Tadamichi Yamamoto, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)), briefed ambassadors on what he called the current "politically dynamic period" that has seen ceasefires by the Government and the Taliban extremist group and preparations for elections in October.

"The key political events of peace and elections are far from assured but we are seeing unprecedented opportunities to make progress to seek peace and to consolidate the political foundation for the future," he said.

The unilateral ceasefires were held earlier this month during the celebrations marking the end of Ramadan.

It was the first time in nearly 20 years that both sides have honoured a call to lay down arms.

Mr. Yamamoto reported that during the three days, social media channels were flooded with photos of representatives from the two sides embracing each other. Local authorities also allowed Taliban fighters to return to their hometowns, while some Afghan soldiers visited areas controlled by the extremists.

Afghans, including Taliban fighters, clearly want peace – *Tadamichi Yamamoto, head of UNAMA*

Despite the developments, a government proposal to extend the ceasefire was not reciprocated.

Mr. Yamamoto explained that because the Taliban's goal is to end the presence of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, it has shunned direct talks with the Government.

But, as he told the Council, ending the long-standing conflict will require talks among all parties, which of course means the Taliban and the authorities will have to meet over the negotiating table.

"What we have learned is that both the Afghan Government and the Taliban have command and control over their troops. Afghans, including Taliban fighters,

clearly want peace. It is also clear that President Ghani is taking courageous steps to seek peace through talks," he said.

Meanwhile, preparations continue for parliamentary elections in October and presidential elections in early 2019.

So far, more than 7 million people have registered to vote in what Mr. Yamamoto described as "a fully Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process".

The UN has provided 23 international experts to work alongside the Independent Election Committee, with additional technical advisers currently being recruited.

Civil society representatives have also committed to monitor proceedings at all polling stations.

The UN Mission chief highlighted concerns, however, such as uneven registration in some provinces, including due to logistical or security reasons.

Mahmoud Saikal, Afghanistan's Ambassador to the UN, said "comprehensive" security arrangements have been put in place to ensure citizens can vote in safety.

"Our hope and expectation is to ensure that these elections will be transparent, credible and inclusive, in accordance with our people's demands," he added.

The security concerns come as deadly violence continues across Afghanistan, with a suicide bombing in the capital, Kabul, on 11 June being the most recent tragedy.

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UNAMA reported more than 5,600 security incidents between mid-February and mid-May this year, while 311 people have been killed by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – a preferred weapon of terrorist groups.

Vladimir Voronkov, head of the [UN Office of Counter-Terrorism](#), told the Council he hoped a global meeting this week at UN Headquarters in New York will boost international cooperation to tackle such threats.

"Afghanistan genuinely needs and continues to request legal technical assistance and capacity-building projects to strengthen its national criminal justice framework to combat terrorism," he said.

Linked to this is Afghanistan's long-standing position as a source for opium, the drug used to make heroin.

The Security Council meeting coincided with the launch of the [annual flagship report](#) by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)). It showed that global opium production reached a record high in 2017, largely driven by Afghanistan.

Mr. Yamamoto also pointed to another threat: drought, particularly in the north and west of the country.

Wheat harvests last year were nearly 60 per cent below the five-year average, and the 2018 crop is expected to be even lower.

The UN has accordingly revised a plan to address the problem, with humanitarians now seeking \$547 million to support affected populations.