

Briefing to the Security Council on Afghanistan

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Mr. President,

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Security Council.

I was in Afghanistan for four days at the end of June to assess the humanitarian situation, given growing concerns about the severity of humanitarian and protection of civilian issues. I visited Nangarhar and Kunar provinces in the East, as well as Kabul. I held discussions with the Afghan Government at the national and provincial level, and with UN representatives, international military force commanders, Member States, and NGOs and others from the humanitarian community. I also met many Afghans who spoke compellingly about the problems they face in their daily lives.

It is clear that humanitarian needs are indeed serious and growing. I would single out four areas.

First, food insecurity, fuelled primarily by drought and compounded by the dramatic rise in global food prices, is hurting Afghans badly, and is a major concern to the Government and the humanitarian community. Wheat prices across the country rose by 58% in 2007 and by another 30-50% in the first four months of 2008. Afghanistan, a country with 42% of its citizens living below the poverty line, is particularly vulnerable to rises in the price of the staple of wheat-flour.

The Government of Afghanistan and the humanitarian community responded quickly to deteriorating food security in January, by issuing an initial appeal for \$81 million. This has been almost fully funded, and is enabling us to reach about 2.5 million people with immediate assistance. But it is far from enough. A second joint appeal for just over \$400 million has therefore been launched today in Kabul, with a focus both on further immediate food, nutrition and health assistance and on agricultural inputs. Initial figures from pre-harvest assessments suggest that the food gap may grow from 500,000 tons of grain this year to 2 million tons next year, in other words one third of the country's annual requirement. I hope donors will respond quickly and generously to this appeal too.

Second, the plight of millions of returnees from neighbouring countries remains a major concern. Since 2002, 4.8 million Afghans – representing 1/6 of the population - have returned home. Over 140,000 have returned so far this year. However, the country's capacity to absorb these returnees is very limited, and there are still 2.3 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan, and another 950,000 in Iran, plus economic migrants who are not registered. Lack of land and jobs, and insecurity prevent many returnees from settling in their original communities. SC Resolution

1806 calls for enhanced international cooperation in ensuring voluntary and orderly return, and I hope we can see a specific effort to respond to this in the region.

In Nangarhar province in the east, I visited Tangi 2, a temporary settlement of 369 families who had returned earlier this year from a now closed camp in Pakistan. These families were living in makeshift shelters, with no agricultural land, limited access to basic services and very few livelihood opportunities. They were completely dependent on outside assistance, with water, for example, sent by truck every day. The UN agencies, particularly UNHCR, and NGOs were doing their best, but the longer-term prospects for these people are uncertain, at best.

Meanwhile many others are internally displaced. One estimated figure is 150,000, most of them in the South of the country. This includes long-term displaced affected by conflict, drought and lack of economic opportunities, and others temporarily displaced by recent fighting. Many of the displaced are in areas that are hard to access, due to continue fighting, making it virtually impossible to collect reliable data.

Third, the conflict is placing increasing pressure on civilians. During the first five months of 2008, a total of 698 civilian deaths were reported by UNAMA, compared to 430 in the same period last year. The vast majority of these casualties were in the South. Of those 698 deaths, 422 were attributed to anti-government elements, with 255 attributed to national and international forces. Another 21 deaths were unattributable. The share of the casualties attributed to national and international pro-government military forces has decreased from 2007 to 2008 and significant efforts are clearly being made to reduce these accidental deaths. However, since the fighting itself has intensified, the overall numbers of casualties caused by all parties to the conflict have also increased. The latest reports of civilian casualties caused by air and missile strikes last weekend can only add to the concern. I particularly regretted the news that three International Medical Corps staff members were killed, and one severely injured, along with a number of villagers, in a Nuristan air strike which reportedly hit a bus last Friday.

Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, also highlighted during her own visit to Afghanistan in June the terrible consequences of the fighting for children, too often among the casualties, and now being recruited into anti-government fighting forces in increasing numbers. 228 schools were attacked with 75 deaths and 111 injured in 2007. In 2008, a further 83 schools have already been attacked.

I heard first hand accounts from tribal elders of how all this has been affecting communities in Kunar and Nangarhar, trapped between the warring parties. They shared their frustration over civilian casualties, frequent house searches by national and international forces, based on what they often saw as poor intelligence, and the lack of a clear mechanism for seeking redress where appropriate.

Fourth, Afghanistan is highly prone to natural disasters, notably floods, earthquakes and droughts. Given the current vulnerability of its people, a major natural disaster could have disproportionately catastrophic effects. Meanwhile we have struggled even to deal with events like the exceptionally harsh winter this year.

Mr. President, faced with these increasing humanitarian needs, the humanitarian community is finding it progressively harder to respond because of insecurity and lack of access. The UN Department of Safety and Security has tracked more security incidents in May 2008 than at any time since the Taliban were expelled in 2001. As of late June, for example, there had been 137 serious attacks on humanitarian organisations, 7 humanitarian workers killed, and 88 staff abductions this year. The World Food Programme (WFP) has already had 13 armed attacks against its convoys this year alone. Such attacks hurt only the poorest of the Afghan people, and are unacceptable, whatever the political or military objectives of those concerned.

Mr President,

All humanitarian actors in Afghanistan expressed great concern to me about blurred lines between military and humanitarian activities. Many Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are doing very valuable work, such as constructing and repairing roads and bridges. However, in cases where PRTs are engaging in what they themselves label 'humanitarian assistance', this can increase the risks faced by civilian humanitarian actors, who are working to provide humanitarian assistance in a needs-based and impartial way.

I believe strongly that PRTs should only provide relief as a last resort, in cases where insecurity prevents civilian humanitarian actors from doing so. It is also preferable that donors, where possible, channel their humanitarian funds through mandated UN agencies and NGOs and not through PRTs, to create a more virtuous circle: UN agencies and NGOs have hitherto had insufficient security, funding and capacity on the ground to act in some areas, leaving serious gaps that the PRTs understandably have sought to fill.

Mr. President,

I believe we must do much more to improve the humanitarian response.

First, we need to support humanitarian actors in increasing significantly their capacity, and in mobilising additional resources for this purpose. We will work with all partners, notably the government, to put in place a new humanitarian action plan to this end. We must also build further the Government's own capacity, particularly in the area of disaster risk reduction and disaster management, and in IDP and returnee management.

Second, we must do more to improve the protection of civilians. It may seem there is little we can do about the actions of the anti-government elements, who show little or no regard for civilians, and contempt for international humanitarian law and the principles of distinction and proportionality, as the latest bloody attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul showed. Nevertheless, any influence that can be brought to bear would help. The insurgent groups should not be allowed to believe that they can kill civilians with impunity. In any case, I believe the UN, international forces and the Afghan Government need to work together in a renewed effort to reduce the impact of this conflict on civilians. There should certainly be scope to reduce further accidental civilian casualties and other problems resulting from the actions of pro-government military forces, and to make their actions more transparent and accountable. Civilians need to know clearly where to go for redress. I would also urge a further effort to

ensure that international military presences are located as far as possible from civilian populated areas.

Third, we need to find ways to distinguish better between military and political activities on the one hand and humanitarian action on the other. No matter how difficult, it is important to find opportunities to expand humanitarian space, to increase access, and to reduce the likelihood of attacks on humanitarian actors. This could include a range of options from days or zones of tranquillity, in order to conduct vital vaccination campaigns against polio or other diseases, to more lasting access agreements in areas of conflict. Arrangements of this kind have been possible in other complex emergencies, and could be possible in Afghanistan too.

Mr. President,

The situation in Afghanistan requires a closely coordinated approach and close partnership between the Afghan Government and the international community. Humanitarian efforts need to find their proper place in this. I hope this Council will support efforts to find new ways to improve our humanitarian response, while the work of stabilising and reconstructing Afghanistan continues.

Thank you for your attention.