

Speech: UK-Afghanistan relations are in extraordinarily good shape: Speech by Sir Nicholas Kay

I welcome you and thank you for joining us to celebrate 92nd Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Why are we here tonight? Why do we and all embassies have this ritual of a National day? I offer two reasons.

First, for us it's all about the Queen.

We are here today to celebrate the official birthday of Her Majesty the Queen, who this year has reached the grand age of 92. I had the enormous privilege and great pleasure of meeting her last month, and I can assure you, she is the bright, kind and very insightful lady you see in this photograph. Her sense of duty, hard work and resilience over the last 76 years as Queen is an inspiration to many. It is hard to imagine that she started the job on 6 Feb 1952 – I imagine before most of us were born.

Second, this evening is a chance for us to share with friends and colleagues some hospitality and good cheer and to reflect – just briefly – on the state of the friendship between our two peoples and countries.

On this let me just say that UK-Afghan relations are, like HM the Queen, in extraordinarily good shape: vigorous, healthy, long-standing yet modern. This week we had our Foreign Secretary in Kabul; currently the First Lady is in London; and HE Dr Abdullah was in UK two weeks ago. Do not worry, I am not going to recite a litany of statistics and examples. Nor shall I boast about the great things we are doing together in the fields of development, education, security, institution building and more! I recognise that all in this garden tonight – in uniform and out of uniform – play an important part in the hard but noble work of helping build peace and reduce poverty.

I pay tribute to our Afghan brothers and sisters who bear the heaviest burden and also to international friends and colleagues, who far from homes, families and loved ones, labour with skill and some sacrifice to help Afghans enjoy a better future.

Our collective work is not easy. It needs patience and humility. But I am extremely confident that a brighter future is dawning in Afghanistan. The glimmering light of that new day was seen during the historic Eid ceasefire, when the whole world saw Afghans embrace and share in ways that many had not done before. In cities and villages across the country, we saw understanding and camaraderie of a sort which Afghans have been yearning, for so many years. In the humblest of backgrounds, with the peace caravan making its way towards Kabul, and the National Unity Government having made the bravest and most open of offers to the Taliban, society came together for a blessed weekend.

Like our Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said on Monday when he visited Kabul to commend the signs of progress he sees, he called on all countries with influence in Afghanistan, especially in the neighbourhood, to use it constructively at this crucial moment.

Conflict has sadly become so common in Afghanistan that it is sometimes hard to imagine what peace feels and looks like. Earlier this year, we held a photo competition asking Afghans to imagine a peaceful future, and to photograph what peace, cooperation and unity mean to them. You will have seen many of their photographs as you came in. Peace for these talented photographers meant everything from children playing merrily on a slide, to a friendly policeman helping a taxi driver out of a rut.

Peace is many things to many people. It is at the forefront of my Government's mission here, working always in strong support of the Afghan led and Afghan owned efforts in this field.

Now is an exciting moment. A moment of rare hope. I salute the efforts of Afghan religious leaders, civil society and the security forces to create and seize this moment of opportunity. I commend equally the National Unity Government for its courage and vision in listening to the Afghan people's thirst for peace and being led by them. As diplomats and friends of Afghanistan, we must support the Afghan people. We too must be bold, confident and imaginative.

The world is changing fast and Afghanistan is not alone in having to adapt to new realities. Geopolitics in the coming year will not get easier. All the more reason why we all need to seize the moment to make vital progress now.

Before we, inshallah, hold Her Majesty the Queen's 93rd birthday celebration in Kabul next year, I believe three important things will have happened in Afghanistan: timely and credible parliamentary and presidential elections will have been held (this is so important and I urge us all to redouble our efforts); the momentum towards peace will have become unstoppable and progress will have been made in ways which we cannot imagine today (and I urge all political actors not to play politics with peace) ; and thirdly – and possibly as importantly – Afghanistan's cricket team will have won their first matches in England in the World Cup series in 2019.

I thank you for your patience in listening. I thank you for your friendship and hospitality over the last year in Kabul.