Mr. President,

it is a great honour to address the Council and I thank you for the invitation to speak about the global drug threat originating in Afghanistan. Actually, I pondered a lot on the wording of this agenda item, coming to the conclusion that a small change would capture better the essence of things. Of course, opium originates from Afghanistan. But the globality of the threat comes also from the rest of the world (especially Europe), hooked on it. In other words, should the Afghans claim that reduction of import demand from consuming countries is as vital as reduction of their own export -- well, I think they would have a point.

In any event, the problem of Afghan narcotics (opium, heroin and morphine) is serious. As a premise, I would like to stress three points:

1. During the past quarter century Afghanistan has found itself at the crossroad of violence and, as a consequence, of illegal activity. War and lawlessness have been the forces that have driven opium production to present levels, and not the other way around.

2. Afghanistan now faces an historic challenge: the establishment of an effective rule of law. The Government's commitment to controlling cultivation, trade and abuse of narcotics can be turned into real progress only if stability and security spread throughout the country.

3. Reference is frequently made to Afghanistan's drug problem. This needs a qualification: it is not true that the whole country is involved in illegal activity. Less than 1% of its land is cultivated for opium poppies, and no more than 6% of families derive the resulting illicit livelihood. Also note that only 5 of the country's 31 provinces produce opium on a large scale.

The Afghan Transitional Administration is gradually rebuilding the country's government. National policies, consistent with the emerging democracy, are being developed. The generous support by the international community, particularly by the nations that have taken the lead in different sectors of the government administration (several of these countries are seated at this table), is indispensable for further consolidation. Mr. President, allow me to thank in particular the government of the United Kingdom, for its generous and relentless role in leading the counter-narcotics work.

In order to rid Afghanistan of its dependence on illegal activities, starting from opium, it is necessary to create ample and easily accessible opportunities for alternative, licit sources of income. This task, however, is rendered complicated by economic and political (security) factors - interrelated as they are.

Let's look at them.

The threat to stability
Drugs originating in Afghanistan provide resources to crime and terrorism, and pose a major health threat. They ruin the life of entire communities. They corrupt. Let's take these points one at the time. The drug dealers, among them the remnants of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, have a vested interest in ensuring that the state remains weak in Afghanistan. They ensure further flourishing of the drug economy with huge profits, recycled in violence and death. In pursuing this goal, they influence politics, foment regional strife, nourish separatist ambitions and armed conflicts to destabilize the government and challenge the national unity.

Corruption is both a cause and a consequence of narco-traffic. My Office has studied extensively the drug trafficking routes: a common element among them is the presence of corrupted government officials, corrupted port and airport staff, and corrupted customs employees. The old Silk Road, now turned into an opium-paved road, is riddled with such evidence.

Perhaps the most serious threat has come from the spreading of HIV/AIDS because of drug injections. In some of the countries neighbouring Afghanistan 4 out of 5 new cases of the blood infection have been determined by drug addiction. Unless the problem is brought under control, the risk of a pandemic in the region cannot be excluded.

Finally, the massive drug traffic from Afghanistan endangers the economic and social stability in the countries located along the trafficking routes, fuelling crime, money laundering and terrorist activities. Unless we reinforce our efforts to strengthen the criminal justice system in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries the crime threat to stability will persist.

The Afghan drug economy can be reconverted to peace and growth if the government is assisted to address the roots of the matter. A report recently prepared by my Office has exposed these roots. First, the report has de-constructed Afghanistan's drug economy into its main components: production, financing, trafficking, refining and abuse. Second, the report has re-constructed the country's development processes piece by piece, showing that it is essential (i) to help poor farmers decide in favour of licit crops; (ii) to replace local narco-usurers with micro-lending; (iii) to provide jobs and education to women and their children.

As said earlier, national efforts are not enough. Afghanistan's opium cultivation, trafficking and abuse have ramifications that reach deeply into the country's (and Central Asia's) recent history, and widely into contemporary geo-politics of terrorism and violence. Hence convergent efforts by neighbouring countries and by Europe and Russia (where heroin abuse helps nourish opium cultivation in Afghanistan), are needed.

UNODC will contribute to the largest possible extent, stretching our work beyond Afghanistan's own borders. While the demand for opiates is rising inside Afghanistan and in the neighbouring countries, the main lucrative market for Afghan heroin remains Europe, where demand reduction efforts should be intensified. This was the view of Ministers who met in April in the framework of the Commission of Narcotic Drugs -- I strongly second this assessment. It would make a significant impact on the Afghan drug threat.

Thank you, Mr. President.