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PRESS BRIEFING BY AHMAD FAWZI, SPOKESMAN FOR THE SRSG FOR AFGHANISTAN

Following is a near-verbatim transcript of today's briefing at 2 pm Bonn time by Ahmad Fawzi, Spokesman for the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi:

It's good to see so many of you are still here. As you know the UN Talks on Afghanistan opened this morning with four Afghan groups, the United Front, the Peshawar group, the Cyprus group and the Rome group. There was a speech from Foreign Minister Fischer, a message from Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in which he said that he hopes that history would record this day as the beginning of a new age for Afghanistan and we have copies of his statement available. They were made available in the morning, I hope you've all seen them, I've seen some of them on the wires already, so you're working very fast.

The agenda we have also released. As we discussed yesterday and the day before you will see that the agenda is quite simple. It speaks about the structure and duration of the transition in Afghanistan, including three main points. The first is the formation of an interim supreme council of Afghanistan, the second is the formation of the interim administration of Afghanistan, and the third is the convening of an emergency Loya Jirga. All the delegates to the conference have agreed to this agenda and it has been adopted so it is no longer a proposed agenda as it says on this sheet of paper. The second item is measures to ensure security for the people of Afghanistan, and we've been debating this issue for some time now, and as you can see, the title is open and flexible and it leaves it up to the Afghan people and delegations what kind of security they would like to see in the country.

A very interesting and dramatic development happened in the second plenary after all the cameras departed: we received a telephone call from Syed Hamed Karzai, who is a Pashtun leader in southern Afghanistan. Syed Hamed Karzai, in a telephone call that was broadcast on the loudspeakers throughout the plenary hall, said a few very important points that I would like to summarize to you and that really reflected the mood of everybody in the hall. He said, we are one nation, one culture, we are united not divided, we all believe in Islam, but we believe in Islam that is the religion of tolerance. We have been made extremely poor and vulnerable, he said, but we are a strong people who would like to assert our will and our sense of self-determination, so that we can really live in an environment of brotherhood and mutual respect. This meeting, he said, is the path towards salvation. All the people I've talked to in Afghanistan believe in a Loya Jirga as the vehicle for bringing in a legitimate government. The interim authority is a means of getting to a Loya Jirga.

I've had these points typed out for you and these notes will be available in the back. This was the message from Syed Hamed Karzai to the UN talks in Bonn this morning. And they really reflected what the heads of delegation said in the second plenary. You all saw what was said in the first plenary. In the second plenary, let me just summarize that all four leaders spoke of this meeting as the beginning of a new era for Afghanistan, one that promises dignity and peace to its people. These are the words of the four delegation heads in summary. They all used more or less the same phrases to describe their thirst for peace, and this is a direct quote from one of the leaders: "We have a thirst for peace. We are here to work for a comprehensive settlement and to find the comprehensive groundwork we need to build a new Afghanistan". They were unanimous in expressing this desire to work for national reconciliation and to create a political system that guaranteed respect for human rights and human values.

We heard very clear calls for an end to the long suffering of the Afghan people – this was repeated in every speech – and a strong desire to rebuild the country and to join the international community. One of the speakers said, and I'll conclude with this, and it's a quote: "We are here as Afghans, we should put our differences aside, this could be the secret of the success of this conference". So, very encouraging words from the heads of the delegations this morning, and in concluding the second plenary, which was held in closed session as you know, Mr Brahimi, the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Afghanistan, who was chairing the meetings said it was clear that you all want to put the past behind you, that you do not want to repeat the mistakes of the past, that all of us at the

United Nations recognized that we must make sure not to repeat our mistakes of the past either, the mistakes of the international community and to work with the Afghans to realize their dream of achieving peace and national reconciliation; and as the Secretary-General said, “of entering a new age for Afghanistan, an age of peace, of harmony, of good relations with its neighbours, and of growing prosperity for all its people under the rule of law”.

One final item: the definitive list of who is here is now available. All these people are in the hall. And I must point out here, if I may, that the question of numbers is no longer really an issue. The sensitivities that emerged in the run-up to this conference before the delegations arrived, seemed to have melted away when the conference started this morning, and the number of people on each delegation no longer seems to be an issue. As Mr Brahimi put it, we hope for consensus at this meeting, we’re not going to take a vote, we hope all the decisions will be taken unanimously.

A final word about the structure of the conference and then I’ll gladly take your questions. They have adjourned for the morning session, they adjourned at about 12 noon. They are talking amongst themselves this afternoon, and will meet with the UN side again at 8 p.m. In the meantime, Mr Brahimi is having some bilaterals with representatives of the international community.

And now I’d be happy to take your questions.

Question: Is there a Shiite presence at this conference?

Answer: Yes there are Shiites at this conference

Question: There’s been a request by the UN organizers for the participants to come to an agreement within three days, as opposed to the earlier time frame of a week or two?

Answer: Well, a week or two was really stretching it. We don’t want to abuse the hospitality of our German hosts, and as I said yesterday, speed is of the essence in this matter. Yes, the parties agreed that they would like to spend three to five days in Bonn working on these issues. They hope to achieve an agreement within that time period on the issues on the agenda.

Question: Can you tell us something about the background of this Pashtun leader that phoned this morning?

Answer: No, I’m sorry I can’t, but I’d be happy to find someone who can later to talk to you, so if you’ll see me after the briefing later. But he’s a highly respected Pashtun leader in southern Afghanistan.

Question: We’re hearing from diplomats in the region and also from participants here that one of the ideas floated is for a much shorter temporary interim administration that will last a few months until the longer two year administration can be put together. Is that a plan that’s been taken up by the participants here, or is it just one of the many that’s been floated?

Answer: Yes, I can tell you that the plan that is being discussed now is an interim administration for a period of say three to six months, until Nawruz for example, in March of next year, and an interim (national) council until that time as well, leading to a Loya Jirga, which will then approve a transitional authority and a transitional (national) council, which would govern the country for a period of up to two years, leading to a constitution and a final Loya Jirga.

Question: The Loya Jirga would not have to actually approve this short interim government or would it also approve that? And secondly will the discussions then go straight back to Kabul rather than again being in a more neutral place?

Answer: No, the discussions happening here in Bonn are among the four parties, and we hope they will come to some agreement on an interim administration that will run the country until the Loya Jirga meets in spring of next year. Where will the discussions go after Bonn, God knows. We would be very happy to go to Kabul, in fact Mr Brahimi has said that a number of times: "We will go where the Afghans would like us to go".

Question: You told us that the participants are discussing security issues right now. Did this take place in the second plenary and could you tell us something more about the different positions on security.

Answer: No, they did not discuss any details in the plenary. They discussed the agenda, they said we are happy to be here, we want to work with the United Nations, we appeal to the international community to work with us, to help us achieve the peace that we need to rebuild our country. And in fact, there was a great sense that this was a momentous period in the history of Afghanistan. It was referred to as a golden opportunity again, to achieve the lasting peace that they have been longing for, for so long. On the security issue, they are breaking up into groups and will discuss that, and I cannot give you a read-out of the positions of the four parties, but we discussed in some length yesterday – but I'd be happy to go into that again if all of you want me to – what the options are. And if I can say one more thing, there's a donors' conference in Berlin next week, and the message that comes out of Bonn is going to be of vital importance to the donors who are meeting next week to decide what kind of support to give Afghanistan. Then there's another very important donors' conference in Japan in January, where they will be pledging sums of money to the development of Afghanistan. That's where they actually make a commitment to spend their billions, and the message coming out of Bonn is going to be crucial for the leaders and the economists who are gathering in Berlin and in Japan.

Question: The phone call that came this morning that you described as dramatic. Did someone broker that call – what is the background to that call arriving?

Answer: It was arranged through our people in Kabul and Islamabad, and we had arranged to have it put through to the meeting today. I describe it as dramatic because it was a voice from Afghanistan, from inside Afghanistan. We at the United Nations knew it was coming, but it was a dramatic moment for everyone.

Question: Did the participants know it was coming?

Answer: No I don't think the participants knew it was coming in advance.

Question: What is the difference between the interim administration and the interim (national) council? And secondly, when would the United Nations like to see the follow up of this conference to take place? Until the Nawruz or would you like to sit again in Kabul or elsewhere and meet earlier?

Answer: The difference between the interim administration and the interim national council is that one is a cabinet-style administration that would be composed of maybe 20 members or 25 members or less. But an interim national council (administration) - and let me get my phraseology here right - is a larger body that oversees the work of the government, a parliament if you will.

Question: You repeat all the time that this meeting is very important, but I want to know why all the leaders refuse to come here and are you prepared to talk with them in the future?

Answer: The people who have assembled here from Afghanistan are decision-makers. If you look at the list you'll find that we have some of the most important people from these groups present in Petersberg today. They are decision-makers. We feel very strongly that they have been given a mandate from the people they represent and that they will go home and fulfil whatever agreement they achieve here in Bonn, at least we hope they do, because the destiny of the Afghan people and the future of the Afghan people rest on their shoulders here today.

To answer a former question if I may, somebody said would we have to meet again or will we meet after the interim phase. It's entirely up to the Afghans, if they want us to meet again in two weeks or three weeks or before Nawruz, before March we would be happy to do so. But let's see what this conference achieves first.

Question: I'd like to return, if I may, to the phone call. What criteria did you use for allowing this particular Pashtun leader to speak to the conference? For example, there are women outside who say they have been excluded from the conference, these are various exiled groups. They say they have no access to the conference, couldn't a phone call from them be put through to the conference?

Answer: Yes, I have it from reliable sources that Karzai was due to attend as a member of one of the delegations but he couldn't make it so he chose the phone instead.

Question: I asked a second part to that question: Is there no access for other people who are here, other Afghan groups, to at least have a phone call if they can't be represented in the conference itself.

Answer: No, I think that we're going to proceed with the groups that are here. I haven't heard requests for phone calls for other groups at this time.

Question: ... Last night with the Northern Alliance, did they make a point that they are in Kabul right now and that they have a sort of stronger position rather than the other three groups?

Answer: Surprisingly not. Surprisingly, they were very flexible in their approach to this conference. They came saying that we have a long history of resistance, but we are here because we have a thirst for peace, that we have a willingness to share power and that we would like to see a transfer of power because we believe that that is in the interests of our country.

Question: I want to ask, you said the delegates are now talking amongst themselves. Are these talks following the prescribed format or are they basically left to their own devices, and is it your sense that the groups are going to need some nudging, that they are actually not quite prepared to open up to each other?

Answer: No. I didn't get that sense at all. None of us did. I think anyone who was in the hall was impressed to see how conciliatory the tone was from the leader of each group and no, there is no specific format for the bilateral talks between the groups.

Question: I wanted to ask you about two points that were made in the speeches by the Foreign Minister and the UN Envoy. One, insisting that women be empowered and be included, and two, asking other countries with an interest in Iran to keep their fingers out of the pie for the time being. I'm wondering if you are satisfied that the presence of one woman delegate, who spent a lot of time in exile, is representative of the women in Afghanistan, and, secondly whether there have been any attempts by the countries surrounding to throw their weight around in the corridors and impose their own agendas.

Answer: Yes we are very satisfied with the composition of the group. We had suggested indeed that they include women and we are very pleased that there are women in both big delegations, and more than one woman I must say. If you look at the list there are three or four women. There were three or four women in the hall today either as delegates or as advisors in delegations. On the question of the neighbours, yes, that's a very crucial issue. We are appealing to the neighbours to cooperate with the international community in helping Afghanistan achieve peace and to learn from the mistakes of the past, and that means not to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and to respect its sovereignty and territorial integrity. There are Member States with us in Bonn. There have been no attempts whatsoever, to answer your question, to influence the talks in any way.

Question: Excuse me, you are talking about multi-ethnic government but now you said Mr Karzai said one culture. What is the difference between this one culture and multi-ethnic group because if it's all-Afghan, then why multi-ethnic group and this kind of thing. Because it's all fighting in the last 25 years for this one culture because the other they don't want one culture because Arab don't want Turkish culture and Turkish people don't want Tajik, Tajik don't want Uzbek. This is the fighting for, so after 25 years you are going back to the first starting point.

Answer: Thank you very much. That's an academic question, but if Mr Karzai calls again I'll be sure to ask him. (Laughter) Joking aside I really don't want to try to interpret Mr Karzai's words. I think they are very encouraging and what he is saying in the rest of his statement is that they are one people and that they should try to live together as one people.

Question: Can I just ask you on the question of the three days? You gave an answer that was almost clear but not quite. You said that they have all agreed that they want to do it within three to five days but the question was, is it the UN's view that you want them to do it within three days, is that what you are pressing? Secondly, you gave us some very useful quotations from heads of the delegations. Can you put names to those quotations, or is that impossible?

Answer: The question of the time. Time is of the essence. Speed is very important in concluding a deal. We don't want to rush them but the situation on the ground is changing so rapidly that we have to bear that in mind. The land needs to be ruled. It needs an authority. It needs an administration, and we need to put it in place as quickly as possible and the people who have come to Bonn, the four groups who have come to Bonn, have said more or less the same. We are eager to move ahead, to rebuild our institutions and our economy, so that's the question of time. We haven't imposed a time frame on them but we have all agreed on three to five days.

The quotations, I really summarised so I can't give you names to the quotation. The last quotation was Mr Jareer, who is the head of the Cyprus delegation, which is the one on, "We are all Afghans, working together as one may be the secret of the success of this conference". We are going to put together a transcript of the opening statements of each leader, which you heard this morning, and they more or less reflect the same feelings.

Question: The German Foreign Minister mentioned this morning, one of his three expectations is a commitment to human rights. Has there been any basic discussion there, for example universal suffrage, that the vote will be extended to women, and have any other specific human rights been discussed at this point?

Answer: No. As I said, we just had two plenaries. One was an open, public plenary and one was a closed plenary, with general statements being made. But in the course of the negotiations that led up to this conference the question of human rights of course was mentioned, as some of the guiding principals for the creation of new institutions. To be an inclusive authority that includes all sectors of society, including women, was also mentioned as one of the guiding principals. And in some of the meetings before today's ceremony – yesterday I believe in one of the meetings – one of the leaders of the groups did mention the fact that they would like to see an all-inclusive government including women and other sectors of society.

Question: I heard some information that four parties already almost agreed to support Mr Zahir Shah as new leader of the interim government. Is it true?

Answer: We have not any specific announcements of names of potential leaders of the interim administration, or the provisional or the interim council, but there has been talk in the past of the former King being a viable candidate as Head of State.

Question: I would just like to ask you to possibly pin down a little bit more information about the relationship between the Northern Alliance and King Zahir Shah, the former King. Where is this going to? Is he part of the solution or is that still under debate and negotiation?

Answer: The question is, can I be more precise about the nature of the relationship between the Northern Alliance and the situation of the King, are they working together?

It's early days yet to answer that question because the structure, the composition, of both bodies has not even been discussed in detail. They have made general statements about their willingness to talk and their willingness to reach an agreement but all I can say is that the parties are talking to each other already. Both the United Front and the Rome delegation and the Peshawar and the Cypriot delegations: they are all talking to each other, in the halls and in each others' working spaces. I am going to take one last question and then we'll wrap it up.

Question: (Start of question inaudible)..... talk about a temporary council and a temporary administration leading to another Loya Jirga and then another temporary council, another temporary thing, leading to a constitution. Does the United Nations have a view on what that constitution should be like or is this simply about appropriate sharing out of power from the people who already have it and want it? I mean, what is the way that the people of Afghanistan have a say in what ends up ruling them.

Answer: The first half of the question for those of you who didn't hear it is that I didn't use the word democracy at all today. So I would like to start using it. Democracy is indeed a very important component for the future of Afghanistan and I'll tell you how it's going to work. There's an interim phase and then there's a transitional phase. What we are talking about here today is the interim phase, getting these two bodies together. During the transitional phase after the Loya Jirga, which will last up to two years, the transitional authority in power and the transitional national council will work on a constitution. A constitution that protects human rights, that establishes a democratic system of government, that ensures equal rights of all, that ensures good relations with its neighbours, that ensures education for girls, that combats terrorism wherever it is. Leading up, hopefully, to democratic elections, and the approval of the constitution by a Loya Jirga.

Question: You used the terminology Nawruz, you've made a couple of references to Nawruz. Can you just elaborate at all whether this is being looked at as some kind of an important milestone for launching a second phase because this is the most important national celebration in Afghanistan, which was banned under the Taliban, despite its popularity.

Answer: It has its symbolism. Nawruz has its symbolism of course and the beginning of the new year. It was chosen as a date that might be a good time for a new beginning in Afghanistan.

Thank you very much.

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