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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:

Good afternoon everyone. I would like to make a few announcements before we get into the serious business of answering your questions (approximately one minute of speech missing due to technical problem) was a cameraman for Swedish television, TV4, who apparently was killed by bandits in northern Afghanistan. So Reporters sans Frontières will be here tomorrow at 12 noon and will have a press conference.

I hear footsteps behind me and that's my cue to talk about the delegation of European women's leaders who came and met the Afghan groups today and they will be talking to you a little later after I have finished my business. But before I get into that, just to remind you that there's a Civil Society Conference, which they are calling the Civil Society Conference for Peace and Development in Afghanistan - opens tomorrow. And they have issued a press release which should be available in the back. Their opening session is at 8am tomorrow. The contact there is the Swiss Peace Foundation, and they give a phone number. The European Women's Declaration on Afghanistan UN Talks will also be available. Let me tell you a little bit about the meeting with the European women. They are a three-woman delegation of European women leaders and met the four Afghan groups today, they are Ms Britt Theorin (Sweden) – Head of Equality Commission, European Parliament, Ms Anne-Marie Lizin (Belgium) – President, Belgian Women's Council, and Ms Karin Jünker (Germany) – President, German Women's Council. They came to offer them and the United Nations their support for these talks on Afghanistan and to wish them every success and of course to highlight the important role of women in rebuilding Afghanistan and in the future of Afghanistan. They encouraged the delegates, of course, to bring women into the process of rebuilding Afghanistan. Two of the women delegates at the conference, and let me give you their names as well, actually spoke. One was from the Rome group delegation, Ms Sima Wali, who will be with you here this afternoon for that press conference at 4 o'clock, and the other was Ms Amena Afzali, who is a member of the delegation of the United Front. The Afghan women spoke about the traditional and historical role of women in Afghanistan in various walks of life and they said that they were grateful to this European women's leaders delegation for their support and they were reassured by their interest in the affairs of women in Afghanistan, and they spoke of the long suffering and suppression of women during the long years of war and especially during the past five years and said that they were glad that they were now going to have the opportunity to resume their traditional and historical roles as active members of Afghanistan society in all fields. The European Union will of course be playing a major role in the rebuilding in Afghanistan. And talking about rebuilding, the Islamabad Conference on the Reconstruction in Afghanistan wrapped up today in Islamabad and international experts and officials there agreed that no effort to rebuild the country could succeed without political stability, which is exactly what we are trying to achieve here in Bonn with the four groups that we are talking to.

And now to the talks. Mr Brahimi and the UN team last night held separate meetings with the four groups to assess their positions on the various issues. It was a progress report, and he met with the four groups separately. The meetings went long into the night; we broke up at about 1am. And now we have four clear ideas of what needs to be achieved. Four groups, four clear ideas. We have yet to see the emergence of one clear idea, and one coherent idea or set of ideas that could constitute an agreement, so all I can say at the moment is that there is much food for thought, and that there is general agreement on the need for an administration to hand over to. Forming that administration is the hard job. Now I'll take your questions.

Question: A question from the Los Angeles Times. By what means will you measure when you have an agreement. Will a simple majority of the delegates approving some concluding statement suffice for the UN organisers or do you expect unanimous agreement?

Answer: We are hoping that the groups will make a decision unanimously. We are hoping for consensus on all or some of the items on the agenda. We are hoping that they will reach agreement on the formation of the interim administration and the supreme council, and let me say that they are making headway. That the Special Representative Mr Brahimi and his team are slowly nudging them forward with advice and guidance and support, and that they have all expressed repeatedly during these meetings their serious intention to reach an agreement, their serious desire for an agreement. So any agreement that is reached here in Bonn will be reached by consensus.

Question: Some of the delegates have expressed optimism that even as early as today or tomorrow that a detailed list of names for an interim council will be named. How likely is that, and secondly, is there division within the United Front between the Uzbeks and the Hazaras and the Tajiks on the question of international troops in the country, especially with the Tajiks opposing and the other two being in favour?

Answer: I don't speak for the Tajiks, the Uzbeks or the Hazaras; I speak for the United Nations. I am afraid you are going to have to ask them that question. On the question of the troops, we all heard the statements that were made by the United Front both in Bonn and in Kabul, and I expect you will have some clarification this afternoon on their position. On the question of lists, yes, it is very possible that we may have lists today ... and they are fine-tuning the question of lists of who will compose both councils, the interim supreme council, and the interim administration.

Question: Could you elaborate on the specifics of the four clear ideas that you have established?

Answer: Not in great detail. Let me be quite honest with you, with all of you, it is quite difficult at this stage to tell you everything that is going on in those rooms, but what is very clear is that each group has a clear idea on the need – there is an agreement in each group on the need – for an interim administration to take over power in Kabul. There is almost agreement on the question of the sizes of each group. Almost. But we are not quite there yet. There is agreement on the need for security, but how to achieve that security is still being discussed. So what I am saying is that over the past 24 hours there has been a fine-tuning of positions, but we are still not there. We are not there yet. There's some very hard work going on. There's a lot of determination to achieve something in Bonn, but we are not quite there yet.

Question: One question – the wires are running stories that two groups among the four are relatively closely in agreement on the framework of the short-term transitional government, namely the Northern Alliance and the Rome group. Could you comment on that and give us a little more detail please?

Answer. Yes, I've read those reports, too, in fact I was informed about them through several phone calls starting at around 6.30 this morning, and I said I'd check. Their positions are quite close and I can't go into any more detail. Sorry.

Question: You sound a little bit less optimistic than you sounded at the beginning of the week. You are telling us that there is a lot to do and that there's hard work going on, do you still have this deadline of wrapping everything up in three or five days, do you think it will be over, for example before the Berlin Donors' Conference? Can you give us an idea about this?

Answer: I have to be careful about my mood. It's only fatigue, I assure you, but we are still very determined to work with the parties to get an agreement here, and yes, the time-frame is still three to five days.

Question: From today? (laughter)

Answer: I guess that if the opening was on Tuesday, then the fifth day is Saturday.

Question: I don't mean to parse your words too closely, but you said that they were fine-tuning the names for the Executive and the council. That would seem to indicate, if they're fine-tuning the names, that they have pretty much agreed on the names, and just have a few to fine-tune. Now is that the two bigger factions, all the factions, or am I just reading too much into what you've said?

Answer: All of the above. (laughter)

Question: If the positions of the King's group and the United Front are close, then aren't we there? The other two delegations haven't huge bargaining power; everyone accepts that the United Front and the King's delegations are the two that count.

Answer: No, all the delegations count and the question was specifically about lists and the composition and that's where I said that they were close. The other two parties do have input, in fact they have formed a committee to work together from the four parties. On the question of fine-tuning, yes, you are reading a little too much into that phrase, it was meant to indicate that both large groups and the other smaller groups have drawn up lists of people who they think should sit on both councils. They are continuing to write names down; they are continuing to consult with each other and with their headquarters in Afghanistan and they are fine-tuning this process of drawing up the list.

Question: Will these lists that are being compiled now be final by Saturday, or is there the possibility that they will be discussed in the future in Kabul after this conference?

Answer: We are hoping that we can have a final agreement here on the composition of both entities, both the supreme council and the interim administration. That is everybody's hope, the UN and the four groups. They see the urgency of a handover of power in Kabul, and they think that these groups should be formed in Bonn. Whether they have their first meeting in Kabul is another issue.

Question: About the two groups, the council and the administration, we hear that the council, there is an agreement on the numbers not on the names: 150 members for the council and 15 for the administration; can you confirm this or not even? And also, the committee, which is supposedly discussing the names, we understand that there are five representatives from the United Front, five from the Rome group, and one from each of the two other delegations. Which would mean that, as you said, each delegation counts, but maybe some count more than the other ones. So can you confirm this composition of the committee please?

Answer: On the numbers game, yes, that's what we've been talking about all along. The interim administration would be the smaller body of the two and the figures that have been discussed are anywhere between 15 and 25, so it could be 21 it could be 23... I'm just grabbing figures out of the air here, that is the range. The figures for the larger body, the supreme council, again, were between 120 and 200. Anywhere between those two figures. A larger assembly, larger than the Executive Administration. I'm not sure what the numbers are on the committee, the small committee, you may be right. But in politics there are always some members who are more equal than others, we all know that. It doesn't mean that the other parties don't have a voice, they have a voice and they have a very strong voice, believe me. I've heard it. (laughter)

Question: Are you satisfied with the role that representatives of other states outside Afghanistan are playing in these talks and could you tell us a bit if any of them is playing a special role in this meeting?

Answer: All Member States are playing a useful role, we're very happy that they're here. They communicate with the delegates on a daily basis throughout the day, in meeting rooms, in the corridors, in the restaurant, and I can't comment any further, because we're not privy to these talks and they don't form part of the conference per se. They mingle with the delegates on the sidelines, but as I said, the role of Member States has always been significant and important, whether it's within the 6+2 or the P-5 or all of the other Member States who have an interest and influence in Afghanistan.

Question: Some members of the Rome delegation told us today that there is a general agreement on the role of the King; the King will be given a symbolic role in this new initial council. Can you specify it?

Answer: No, I'm sorry, I can't, because no agreement has been reached yet. There has been a lot of talk in the press about the role of the (former) King. The former King, as Vendrell told you yesterday, is a very popular figure throughout the country, I understand, and that issue will be raised inevitably in the talks perhaps today or tomorrow, but no agreement has been reached on any of these issues yet.

Question: If you say the two bodies have to be created here but the first meeting may be in Kabul, does it not naturally follow then that they have to have an agreement on the multinational force question here too, because otherwise part of these bodies won't want to go to Kabul.

Answer: It's an important issue. We've said, security is of paramount importance, you can't have an administration functioning in an environment of chaos and anarchy, where there are guns all over the place. We need security especially in the capital Kabul, if only to start with. However, this is the destiny of their country. The responsibility lies on the shoulders of those Afghan leaders sitting up on the hill on Petersberg. If they don't reach agreement on security here, they're going to have to reach agreement on security elsewhere. If we have agreement on one of these issues, this conference will have been a success. The two aren't necessarily linked in terms of negotiations. We try to achieve what we can, when we can, with whom we can. And if we can achieve a local administration in Kabul within the next 24 to 48 hours, then that will have been a success. The talks may then adjourn and resume elsewhere to work on the outstanding issues.

Question: United Nations move very slowly in the last 20-25 years, now you would like to have success in five days?

Answer: Thank you for your question sir, because the international community, which is represented by the United Nations, has failed Afghanistan over the past 22 years. If we had not turned our back on Afghanistan ten years ago, we would not be sitting here today. But nevertheless, we are here today. The international community has risen to the challenge of rebuilding Afghanistan as it has never done before. Afghanistan's problems have never had so much attention, and will never again have such a great amount of attention and commitment. If we don't seize this opportunity, it would be a very grave mistake. The parties are very close to moving away from the abyss. It's taken them 22 years to climb that cliff. And it can take one little mistake to slip back into the abyss or one courageous, momentous move forward, to create the momentum to rebuild Afghanistan. And I believe that we have that commitment within the international community today. We've heard it from the delegates, we've heard it from the Member States, we've heard it from the international system. The commitment exists today, and the staying power and the will to help Afghanistan move forward.

Question: Has the topic of an international security force been discussed this morning at all in the meeting room, or is there a lot of pressure from the outside observer delegations on the Afghans on this?

Answer: I can't speak on behalf of the Member States representatives, but I'm sure the topic is being discussed everywhere. We're discussing it here; they're discussing it there in the corridors of the conference. I can't tell you whether that was tabled on their agendas specifically this morning, but I have no doubts that they will be discussing it today. This is the third day, and it's high time we got down to the nitty gritty of this issue. And I'm afraid I forgot to tell you that, and I'm going to have to run after one more question, that Mr Brahimi is meeting with the four groups in a working meeting to see where we are in these talks and that is at 2.30 today, with the four groups together as a group.

So I'll take one last question then leave you to your devices with the European women leaders and the other two press conferences.

Question: You talk about clear ideas, back to the issue of security, does it cover this issue as well.

Answer: Yes, the ideas that are emerging from the four groups do include the issue of security.

Thank you very much.

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