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PRESS BRIEFING BY AHMAD FAWZI SPOKESMAN FOR THE SRSG ON 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:

First I would like to apologise for keeping you waiting. I'd also like to say how much I've appreciated, and all of us have, over the past seven days, your patience and your indulgence, and apologise again if we haven't been as forthcoming as you would have liked us to be. I think the time has come now for some good news. It's been great working with you, and I hope that the media will not lose interest in the story of Afghanistan as we move into the state of recovery and reconstruction and building a better life for the Afghan people.

Well, the UN talks on Afghanistan in Bonn have produced a document. At around 1 a.m. Bonn time last night, the four parties with the United Nations agreed a text, which lays the groundwork for an interim administration to take office in Kabul as soon as possible. The interim administration will be assisted, as you know from previous reports, by a Special Independent Commission for the Convening of the Emergency Loya Jirga, and a Supreme Court for Afghanistan.

To clear up some confusion over numbers that I may have caused the day before yesterday: the numbers for the interim administration are 29, including a head of that administration; so 28 members and a chairman. The numbers for the Special Independent Commission for the Convening of the Emergency Loya Jirga are 21, separate, and those who serve in the interim administration will not serve on the Independent Commission.

So now we have a road map to a free and independent Afghanistan over a period of two and a half years, leading in the end we hope, to a new constitution and free and fair elections. If I may add here, the document reflects the will and wishes of the people represented here, who represent the people of Afghanistan at this stage. We know it's an imperfect representation, but we have said this time and time again: you have to start somewhere and it's an important first step towards the establishment of a fully representative, broader based, gender sensitive, multi-ethnic government down the line.

What's the next step? Today, Mr Brahimi is discussing names. I'm very pleased to announce that now we, at last, have lists of names from all the four parties, including the United Front. We have about 150 names now in our possession, and the UN team, in consultation with the Afghan parties is distilling these lists and creating, if you will, a short list that will then be submitted to the group as a whole later today. We are acting as facilitators, as mediators, as brokers, if you will, we are helping them bring this list down to the 28 that they feel would be perfect to serve their country in the next six months, and we are also going to assist them in their selection of a leader.

The last remaining item will be to decide when this takes effect. There's a blank space where we're going to insert a date. "The Interim Authority shall take office as of [blank]", and we're going to fill this blank sometime today, we hope, in consultation with Professor Rabbani in Kabul. We're going to find an appropriate date for all concerned, taking into consideration rapidly changing events in Kabul and in Afghanistan, taking into consideration the month of Ramadan, and taking into consideration the urgent need of the people for a transfer of power.

I'd be happy to take your questions now, if you have any.

Question: I know that the UN was not involved in the drawing up of the names by the four groups, but can you confirm that Mr Qanooni's and Mr Abdullah's names were not in a list of names that came from Kabul, and those two names were added here, and also that Mr Qanooni did not attend the meeting last night in which the list was presented.

Answer: Are you the early morning caller? I can't discuss, I'm sorry, lists of names and when they were formed and how they were formed and who was added and who was subtracted and when it was given to us and when it was taken away. All I can say now is that we have a complete list of names. As to the attendance or lack of it by Mr Qanooni at yesterday's meeting, yes, you're right, he wasn't there, but he had ample representation from about 11 members of his delegation. His delegation includes some very highly qualified solicitors who went through the text with us in great detail the night before. He may have had other things to do, and I would suggest you ask him.

Question: First of all I would like to ask if we could have this document today? And then, was there any major change in this document in comparison with the draft, and why?

Answer: I'm afraid not, much as I would like to give you the document - and it'll save you asking me a lot questions to start with - it hasn't been signed yet. And we can't distribute a document that hasn't been signed, sealed and delivered, so when it's signed it will become a public document. Has it changed much from the original draft? I can tell you this document has changed, I can't count the number of times it has changed over the past seven days. After the seventh day, however, the broad outline remained the same. And last night there were a few amendments, there were some amendments to the text, a few additions. If I may just flag one other complication that arose: that is the translations into Pashtu and Dari. This is a document that is essentially, at the end of the day, going to be an Afghan document. It will rest in their archives for future generations to see and read. So, it has to be in the local languages and it has to be perfect in the local languages. It's taken us a while to try and reconcile the languages and to find the words in Dari and Pashtu that reflect the meaning in English that we've been negotiating about all along. So when all that is all and done, and the document signed, it will become public.

Question: Without in any way wishing to diminish the significance of the agreement on the document, would you agree with me that the agreement of names could be very much more difficult, because the document makes provision for a vote among the administration with a quorum of 21, therefore the 28th and 29th names to be agreed are as important in terms of voting weight within the administration as the appointment of the chairman. We're down to the raw politics of how power is distributed. Presumably, it's realistic to imagine that this process could take days rather than hours.

Answer: I hope not, I hope you're wrong, but you're quite right in the sense that this is a very difficult hurdle. We're not there yet, and as I've said repeatedly, it ain't over until everything is said and done. And this is an important hurdle, equally important, probably, as negotiating the text. However, I think what we've seen over the past few days is a reconciling of positions, gradual movement towards a meeting of minds, especially on the necessity to get this administration up and running as quickly as possible, and I think that with that in mind the parties realise they have to reach a decision here today in Bonn to get those names on paper. Quotas and quorum will be discussed of course, but the most important thing is ethnic balance, at the end of the day for this interim administration, which is going to serve for six months. Then the most important step will be afterwards, that the Emergency Loya Jirga will appoint a new transitional administration, which will run for a period of two years.

Question: Has Mr Brahimi finished his name list by now, and if so when will he submit his list to the group_

Answer: No, he hasn't finished, he's far from finished. Mr Brahimi consulted with his aides and with the delegates throughout the morning. Until I got here he was still huddled in a meeting with the head of one of the delegations. He will continue to do so until Iftar time, and I think that it will be reasonable to think that he will meet with the groups as a working group after Iftar, the traditional breaking of the fast.

Question: You talked about the date blank that has to be filled in. So, let's think day blank will be in two weeks from now or something like that. Does that also mean, can you confirm, that on that day blank when the provisional government takes up its work, the International Security Force also will take up its work on that day, at least a symbolic kind of international force?

Answer: Right, it's a good question, and no, I can't guarantee it. It all depends on how fast the Security Council can get a resolution out. And how fast the countries willing to be part of that force can get their troops ready. I know that there are efforts behind the scenes now in New York to start drafting such a text and we hope that it can be put together as quickly as possible because, as the Agreement says, the UN participants in the UN Talks request - as soon as they sign this document, they will have requested - the United Nations Security Council to consider - **to consider** - the early deployment of a UN-mandated force. The responsibility of this force will be to maintain security in the capital, Kabul, and its immediate surroundings, with the possibility of expanding as required. So speed is of the essence, but I can't guarantee that it'll be there on the same day that the new Administration assumes power in Kabul. But it is an objective that we hope we can accomplish.

Question: Just as a follow up to that question, is there a risk of a security vacuum from the moment that power is transferred?

Answer: Security in Kabul is essential for a new administration to function under the current circumstances and there is, indeed, a danger of a vacuum if a force cannot get in there as quickly as possible. We all know that there are military operations going on throughout the country, however, we have been assured by the de facto administration in Kabul that they are capable of maintaining security and law and order for a short period until the forces arrive. But we will try to rush that through as quickly as possible.

Question: What will the consultations with Mr Rabbani focus on - on his early retirement and - or - any future post to compensate him for his readiness to step aside?

Answer: We haven't started that kind of dialogue with Professor Rabbani yet, and I'm not implying that we will. This is something for the Afghan leadership to decide. Mr Rabbani has been cooperative so far in producing the list of names and in authorising his delegation to negotiate and approve the agreement in Bonn. Today we will be consulting with him on the date upon which the new administration can assume power. We haven't completed our work here yet. We have yet to choose, with the Afghan parties - or assist the Afghan parties in choosing - their new administration. We haven't seen the complete choice yet, so the role of Professor Rabbani over the next period is unknown to us. It is something that the Afghan parties, especially the United Front, will have to decide. What I can say, and I would make an appeal to Mr Rabbani, to continue cooperating with the United Nations and to continue supporting the Bonn Process until the successful conclusion of a transfer of power.

Question: On the short list, what criteria are being used by Mr Brahimi to shorten the list, and how long is the shortlist. Will the names be associated with jobs, and exactly how are the delegations going to vote on these names?

Answer: Professional competence and personal integrity are the two main criteria for selection. How do we know? Mr Brahimi has experts on his team, who know Afghanistan very well. We will also be counting on the integrity of some of the people who are assisting us here in Bonn - Afghans and non-Afghans. How short is the shortlist? As short as we can make it to choose 28 plus one, and there will be no vote on the question of names. We are hoping to reach an Agreement on the names unanimously. We hope for a unanimous agreement, or at least an agreement by consensus on who will run the country for the next six months.

Question: Would all the groups be equal partners in the interim administration, or some groups would be more equal?

Answer: Well, as we know, in politics some are more equal than others. And I can't see how you can avoid that here. You have groups that carry a little more representative weight than others. I don't know what the quota system will be yet. The most important thing that we are trying to achieve is ethnic balance.

Question: When you first told us of the first draft of the Agreement, you said that in this text was a provision against granting an amnesty to people who were considered to be responsible for human rights violations and violations of the rights of war, if I remember it well. Now, could you confirm that this provision is no longer included in the final text of the Agreement please?

Answer: No I am sorry I cannot confirm that anything has happened to that paragraph.

Question: I had an interview with Professor Sirat and he was elected from the Rome group as a nominee for the highest position here, and then he gave us the interview and he confirmed that. But now this morning we got another report, and he said he's resigned now, he's not any more the candidate. So who will be the next?

Answer: I am so sorry I can't go into the names of candidates so far. You've all heard the names that were announced by Professor Rabbani's spokesman yesterday. He was one of them. If he has withdrawn his candidacy, that's his privilege of course. The decision at the end of the day will be taken by the participants in the Bonn Conference. I see you are a little displeased with my answer, the gentleman behind you – did you want to follow up on the question of amnesty? I gave you a frank answer and I cannot confirm that anything has happened to that paragraph. You may have better sources than I do.

Question: Is it still in there?

Answer: Yes, it was in there last time I looked.

Question: Mr Fawzi, the young generation has more interest in their Prince, Mostapha. What kind of role will Prince Mostapha play in the Interim Government and is his name in the list?

Answer: I am sorry it is difficult for me to answer that question because we don't decide what role anyone will play in the Government yet. It's entirely as we said – and I cannot emphasize this enough – it's an Afghan process. We are simply facilitating. I don't know whether his name is on the list yet because I haven't seen the complete lists. I have seen a few of them but I haven't gone through them with a magnifying glass, so I'm not sure whether his name is on it or not, and it's entirely up to the participants in the talks to decide what role, if any, he is going to have.

Question: Mr Fawzi, are you hopeful enough to have a date to give us for a ceremony of signature, for example, and will it be wrapped up before the Dentists' Conference in that building?

Answer: Inshallah, as we say, Inshallah. Am I hopeful? I'm always hopeful. Mr Brahimi is a cautious man. He is not given to great displays of emotion or optimism. He is very cautious. He's proceeding a step at a time. He has finished one big hurdle, there's another one ahead of him and he is focusing on it at the moment. We hope, if all goes well, to have a signing ceremony tomorrow. And I stress, if all goes well. That grain of sand is still floating up there in the air waiting to drop into the machine. And I hope it doesn't. I hope we can get out of here before it does. And before the tide rises high enough to sink this boat. (Laughter.)

The other thing I'd like to say is that Mr Brahimi is really looking forward to seeing you. He's very sorry he hasn't been able to come down over the past seven days and you've had to do with (Interjection from floor: EIGHT!) – eight - but as soon as we sign, he'll be here to tell you the whole story.

Question: I am Richard (Budrow) from the Los Angeles Times.

Reply: Ah, the 2am calls! (Laughter.)

Question (continued): Could you please tell us what is spelled out in the agreement and – or – understood among the delegates about the number of women who will be on the new Council and whether specifically there will be a Ministry of Women's Affairs, or what other ministries the women on the Council may head?

Answer: I can confirm that there are references to gender sensitivity. I can confirm that there are references to the participation of women, to the importance of the participation of women, in a new administration in this text. How many exactly is not specified. It is left open to the delegates to decide but I think from sitting in on these meetings over the past few days there is an awareness, and in fact the women who have been participating in these talks have been quite outspoken, which is something we expect, and we are gratified to see and their word has been heard in the chamber rooms in Petersberg. Whether there's going to be a specific Ministry for children and women remains to be seen, but I did hear talk about the possibility of creating such a Ministry. I can't confirm it, but since there was talk about it there is certainly room for negotiation on that front.

Question: Will one of those five deputies be a woman?

Answer: There is a tendency towards including a woman amongst the five deputies, that is correct.

Thank you very much.