

Königswinter, 28 November 2001

PRESS BRIEFING BY YUNUS QANOONI, HEAD OF THE UNITED FRONT DELEGATION

Following is a near-verbatim transcript of the English interpretation of today's briefing at 3.30 pm Bonn time by Mr Yunus Qanooni, head of the United Front delegation:

In the name of God, as everyone knows there are historic meetings taking place on the initiative of the United Nations and with the Federal Republic of Germany being the host. In the meantime we thank the organisers of this event, i.e. the United Nations and the Federal Republic of Germany. We are hopeful that this series of meetings will lead to a sort of constructive agreement, which will lead to a permanent peace and stability in our country.

The opening meetings took place yesterday and different groups put forward their views about their transitional mechanism.

The uniting points, the common points, in the talks which took place yesterday were more than the points which had to do with potential disagreements.

As far as the Islamic State of Afghanistan and the United Front is concerned, we have supported the proposed plan of the United Nations on bringing about peace and stability as far as the sort of transitional mechanism is concerned.

As we announced yesterday, in principle and on a general basis, we agree with the plan, but as far as the details are concerned we are holding talks amongst ourselves and we will announce them in due course.

Today we had internal meetings amongst different groups. The results of these meetings were useful and positive. And I suppose that we should be hopeful that in the remaining two to three days we will reach positive and constructive conclusions. Of course this is not our expectation to walk along the route of the past 23 years overnight.

We believe that as far as we agree on general points and on principles, so far we have been successful and we are hopeful that in details there are potential hopes that we will reach positive conclusions.

We hope that we will have another press conference at the end of this series of meetings so that we give you the good news from the people of Afghanistan so that you relay to the people of the world, [(interpreter) and the previous point I should just mention that Mr Qanooni was referring to the details as far as the transition period and the Loya Jirga are concerned.]

I would like to thank you, too, for paying enough attention and having detailed coverage of this important conference and now I would like to take your questions.

Question: The Northern Alliance has said in the past that it does not want a multinational force but an all-Afghan police force to ensure security in the country. Now that you have had a chance to speak with some of the other delegations can you understand their preference for the involvement of foreign forces, do you see that as a likelihood now?

Answer: As we have made it clear in the past and the present also we believe, we prefer that security is looked after with Afghan forces themselves. A force composed of different ethnic groups and different parties and still we insist on that but so far there has not been any detailed discussion about the composition of the peacekeeping force.

Question: Mr Qanooni, could you outline in more detail please, what were the major topics you addressed today, what are the major problems you tried to tackle today?

Answer: As I mentioned, we had meetings among ourselves and for example we have been discussing the criteria on what personalities, what kind of people should take part in the interim council and we have reached some levels which will lead to more agreements and more positive conclusions.

Question: How confident are you that whatever is agreed here in Bonn will be accepted by leaders in Afghanistan, especially the Northern Alliance leaders and how often are you in touch with them throughout this week?

Answer: The delegation which has come to Bonn representing the Islamic State of Afghanistan and the United Front is representing actually the Islamic State of Afghanistan and the United Front and it has been appointed by them so we hope that whatever decisions we take will be agreed with them as well. We don't see any problem.

Question: Can you tell us in some more detail on which topics you didn't reach an agreement yet, on which topics you disagreed?

Answer: As I said before we are now in the middle of the talks and we are not in a position to tell you about the details, and we are hopeful that at the end of the talks we will give you the good news about the positive conclusions in which we hope that the expectations of the Afghan people and the international community are reflected.

Question: Mr Qanooni, are you in favour of the multi-national force on the ground in Afghanistan, or not?

Answer: As I mentioned, we don't feel the need for an outside peacekeeping force and at the moment there is full security in place. If there is a need for extra security, then of course we can have combined forces from the ethnic groups inside Afghanistan.

Question: My question has two parts. You are quite isolated on the Petersberg, first of all, how much communication do you have, for example, with President Rabbani in Kabul, and second of all, what influence do foreign observers exert on your meetings and discussions?

Answer: We are in contact with President Rabbani almost every day and we expect from the international observers to agree with what the Afghans agree amongst themselves. And this is clear that the Afghans have never been influenced by foreign influence, and we are of course grateful to the United Nations and international observers for their support so far. And the Afghans, of course, when they talk amongst themselves, they consider national interests and put national interests before anything else.

Question: Mr Qanooni, you said about the personalities that will be included in the interim administration. So are you looking number-wise also that Northern Alliance will have this much of seats or the other group will have this number of seats?

Answer: In our talks and agreements we try our best to represent different groups, the combination of different ethnic groups and of course this is very important. This is one of the most important priorities.

Question: You are emphasising a lot on the different ethnic groups being represented. How representative are the current groups in the Bonn conference?

Answer: Of course real representation calls for real democracy and free elections and in the present circumstances we try our best to ensure as much representation as possible.

Question: I've got two questions. On the question of multi-lateral forces, can you clarify what you are saying: that you don't want any foreign troops, or are you willing to accept suggestions that perhaps there could be a limited presence of foreign troops to secure airports and to secure air convoys. And the second question is, when you talk about taking the next phase, the next round, of these talks inside Afghanistan, can you give a commitment that those talks could be held in a neutral territory, a demilitarised territory, perhaps territory which is nominally given over to the UN, or would it be under areas which Northern Alliance control?

Answer: As I mentioned earlier, as far as the international peace-keeping force is concerned, at the moment there is no need for that and also we have not talked in detail about that amongst ourselves and while in principal it can be part of a comprehensive peace package, but as far as the holding of the next round of talks in Afghanistan is concerned of course we would like to have them organised and held in the historic city of Kabul.

Question: The question is about, he is saying that Pakistan has been interfering in Afghanistan and trying to create hostilities among the Afghan nation. Are you trying to influence the United Nations so that the United Nations in turn influences Pakistan in order that Pakistan stops doing that?

Answer: As we know, Pakistan has not only been interfering but also aggressing Afghanistan through the creation of the Taliban, and now we know that the Taliban are vanishing into the history and we believe this is a very good opportunity for Pakistan to review its strategy towards Afghanistan so that this strategy can ensure the protection of the national interest of both countries.

Question: Two questions, would you be willing to see the King of Afghanistan play a role in the next transitory period? And the second question is, I see there is a lady sitting next to you, I would like to know which role the Alliance sees for women in the future of Afghanistan and also in the administration.

Answer: First of all I would like to make a request, we are the United Front, we are not the Northern Alliance, this is a title that has been imposed on us, or has created by foreigners, and the United Front not only includes the north, but also the south, the east, the west the centre, and please don't call us Northern Alliance any more.

As far as the role of the former King is concerned, we don't believe in the role of persons or personalities, we believe in systems, for example, the Loya Jirga as a national system, as a traditional system in Afghanistan: once we pick things through a Loya Jirga and if the people agree through Loya Jirga that the King has a role then no-one can deny that.

As far as the role of women is concerned, we have been emphasizing that the women should have full participation and an active role in the decision-making processes and all our society. And as we can see, Mrs Afzali, who is a symbol of resistance and freedom in Afghanistan, we have made sure that people like her, their legitimate rights are ensured.

Question: The question is about the Loya Jirga and the Afghan refugees outside Afghanistan, for example, two million in Iran, two million in Pakistan, the issue of them being represented, and also as far as ethnic minorities are concerned, for example the Turkmens.

Answer: We believe in all ethnic groups being represented properly and fully. For example, if we wanted in this meeting to represent all ethnic groups, we would be in a position to put so many chairs in here and there won't be any space for them here. The criteria as I mentioned before, the merits and the capabilities and abilities of personalities are very important.

Question: One of the proposals floated before the opening of the conference was a German one of an interim government, eight of which appointed from your Alliance, including the Prime Minister, and seven from the others. Are you ready to accept this proposal?

Answer: There has not been any decision or any proposal about the composition or the combination as far as the quantity is concerned of such a mechanism before the conference, but now we are going to talk about that in the course of this series of talks, and of course, whatever agreement we reach, it should be reflective of the interests of the Afghan nation.

Question: What kind of an impact does the development of military actions in Afghanistan have on your conference here? To mention only one aspect, one part of the Alliance, one major, General Dostum is accused of serious violations of the rights of prisoners of war in Mazar-i-Sharif. Did you address this problem and what was your assessment and judgement of it?

Answer: The internal military developments will not have any negative impact on the peace process, on the negotiations here, and our call has always been the call for peace, even at the time when we were besieged in a village. As far as the violations of human rights in Mazar-i-Sharif is concerned I don't agree with that.

Mr, Qanooni is going to take one more question.

Question: The question had two parts; one was that the United Front is not putting a lot of importance on the Peshawar group, because they don't have any military power in Afghanistan. The next part of the question was about the moderate Taliban, before there was this issue that the United Front may enter into negotiations with the moderate Taliban.

Answer: That's not right, we have been negotiating with [the Peshawar group], this evening we have a meeting with them. The story of moderate Taliban was created by those people who created the Taliban themselves, because the Taliban were being defeated, so they wanted a new sort of approach to interfere in Afghanistan.

Last question.

Question: Regarding the future President or the Head of State of Afghanistan – is Mr Rabbani going to be the president, or is somebody else from the Jamaat-i-Islami party going to be the President; and is it going to be elective or selective and what role is he and also you going to play?

Answer: Mr Rabbani can be a candidate and I am also the head of the security arrangements in Kabul.

Thank you

* * * * *