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**PRESS BRIEFING BY AHMAD FAWZI, SPOKESMAN FOR THE SRSG FOR AFGHANISTAN,
AND MR FRANCESC VENDRELL, DEPUTY 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, and Mr Frances Vendrell, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan:

Mr Ahmad Fawzi, Spokesman of the SRSG for Afghanistan:

I just have a few things to say and then I will hand it over to Mr Vendrell, for whom you've been waiting extremely patiently, and I'm sure he'll be able to answer all the questions that I can't. A few housekeeping notes; we always have the press briefing notes from Islamabad and Kabul in the back on a daily basis. I think they might be useful for you to put the whole picture together. For example, I was looking at the briefing from Islamabad today, and on the money front WFP announced that Japan has donated 23.3 million dollars towards the WFP Afghanistan emergency operation, bringing Japan's total contribution to 33 million. And it makes Japan the second largest donor next to the United States. Another donation just in was from the government of Australia, and that was for 3.4 million dollars, and that makes the World Food Programme now almost 80% funded for their operation in Afghanistan, which is quite remarkable, as we are always going around with hat in hand begging for contributions for our humanitarian operations. Transcripts of this briefing are also made available at the end of the day each day.

Another announcement I would like to make is that Mr Qanooni, who is the Head of the United Front delegation to the UN talks on Afghanistan here in Bonn, is coming here at 3.30 to meet you. Mr Qanooni, the head of the United Front delegation will have a press conference in this room at 3.30; he will have a translator as well – simultaneous translation into English.

A few words before we go to Mr Vendrell: After the opening statements which were made by the heads of delegation yesterday and which we all agree were characterized by a unanimous desire to make progress on the agenda, the real work began. The groups spent the rest of the day and much of the night discussing the items on the agenda, specifically the creation of the interim administration of Afghanistan, as a first step towards a handover of power in Kabul. The meetings are being held as informally as possible, there isn't a specific structure, in order to allow for real discussion as opposed to more formal conferences. So there have been discussions among and between the parties and they've also had the opportunities to meet representative of Members States, who happen to be in the same building. And they've also consulted occasionally with Mr Brahimi and Mr Vendrell and other members of the UN team. This afternoon there will be a working meeting between Mr Brahimi and the four Afghan groups to assess whatever progress they may or may not have made so far.

Yesterday we spoke about development and how important it is and how important the outcome of this meeting will be for the donors meeting in Berlin next week and in Japan in January. The Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, is in Washington today to discuss this very topic, development in Afghanistan, reconstruction, recovery, rehabilitation. He will be talking to the heads of the World Bank and the IMF in separate meetings. While he is in Washington, he'll also meet US President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and both Senate and House leaders on Capitol Hill.

One last word before we go to Mr Vendrell: These talks are not going to be easy. Someone said today "One grain of sand can stop the machine". And I'll just leave it at that and with pleasure I introduce the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Afghanistan, Francesc Vendrell.

Mr Frances Vendrell, Deputy SRSB:

For a moment I thought I had been elevated in rank and I was going to show great pleasure. But nonetheless I am very pleased to meet with all of you. I don't really have very much to say. First of all you're going to have one of the main actors here at 3.30; but secondly, most importantly, these are early days, or early hours, I don't want to speculate on the length, but I mean they just arrived, they arrived on Monday evening all of them. Some of them are getting to know each other. We think the delegations, because some of them haven't met before for quite some time, they've had to agree to common positions. And then they've been meeting with other delegations, often in bilateral groups. I think the atmosphere, I have noticed, is very good. That doesn't mean that it will remain always good. In these kinds of meetings at the very beginning one feels very happy to see often people who one has met at school, or at university, or even in the battlefield, and the atmosphere gets rather warm. There could well be ups and downs in the course of these talks, but so far so good.

As you heard Mr Brahimi is going to be meeting very shortly with the four delegations simply to hear how they have been doing. We have to decide whether we should not help them move along or overcome obstacles that occur along the way, and we probably want to hear one by one, delegation by delegation, or small group by small group, how they are doing, and encourage them and prop them in the direction that I think Afghans want and I think the international community wants, and that is basically the establishment, very soon, of an interim body that would be there until the emergency Loya Jirga, that would agree on the rules and modalities of how this Loya Jirga would be conducted, and later on onwards towards the transitional government and its natural culmination at the end of the period with elections, so that the Afghans are quite clear who is the legitimate government. There may be losers, but for as long as the losers down the line know that they have the chance of being the winners on the next occasion, I think they will accept. We need to get away from these de facto situations that have been disturbing the Afghan political scene since 1973.

That's all I would like to say, but if there are any questions I would welcome them.

Question: Have you had any indication from the Northern Alliance that they are prepared to accept any form of multinational force?

Answer: This issue, of course, is a very important in these talks, but we have not had an opportunity of discussing this issue at length with any delegation, and quite honestly, I think that this will be an issue that will need quite a lot of work and you should not expect an immediate agreement on this matter.

Question: The US envoy Dobbins yesterday suggested that the four delegations are essentially agreed that the former King should play an important figurehead role in the transition. Is that your interpretation and if so when would he go there, how would that take effect, could he do so remaining in Rome for several weeks, would he fly there within weeks? How do you see that shaping up?

Answer: The former King of Afghanistan enjoys widespread, I would say almost unanimous, respect amongst the Afghans, and he has an unmatched popularity in terms of any other figure. That does not necessarily mean that everybody who is a power-holder in Afghanistan agrees to give him a role. I think there are indications that most people in the delegations across the four groups that are here would like to see a role for the former King, but that's as far as I would like to go at the moment.

Question: Of those 20 or 25 seats around the council that is hopefully eventually decided, has the Northern Alliance already said how many seats or what portion of how many seats they want. Are they talking numbers yet?

Answer: We are not talking numbers yet.

Question: You have said that it is too early to decide over this multinational force. Do you mean it is too early in Bonn?

Answer: It's too early in Bonn, the talks have just started, they have only been at it for a day and a half. We haven't yet had lengthy and in-depth discussions with each delegation, so that's what I meant with it's too early.

Question: About the King, you said there is not an agreement, but is the issue of the King being discussed already? Because many delegates say well actually we are not really discussing yet about the Ex-King. How is the situation? Is it an important issue already or the discussion about his role will it come later on?

Answer: The role of the former King is an important issue. It has therefore been in the background of these discussions, but that's as far as I would like to comment at the moment.

Question: Could I accept two related questions: One do you accept, as many seem to do, that there can only really be agreement at these talks if you're able to talk both substantial matter, the political process, the interim body, whatever it is, and the security issue as well? And on the point of the interim administration, whatever form it takes, you've talked about the possibility that there might be winners and losers at stage one but that they could be satisfied that they wouldn't necessarily be winners and losers in subsequent stages. Surely there is a real feeling among some of the delegations, however temporary you argue the first arrangement will be, it will always be seen as a precedent, and therefore are critically important, percentages, however they are defined are critically important.

Answer: I am afraid that maybe I didn't express myself clearly. I said after there are elections down the road three years from now, there will be winners and losers, like in any electoral system. But the great thing about the democratic system is that the losers can hope to become winners. I wasn't referring to this moment in time. As for the general agreement, I don't want to say what exactly a successful agreement would consist of. And I do want to warn you that an entire full agreement on every issue may not be achievable in this particular meeting. People are sitting here and discussing the future of Afghanistan for the first time in 28 years, and therefore you can't expect everything to be resolved in four or five days.

Question: Have there been talks on the security matter, the sending of the multinational force, between the delegates?

Answer: We have raised, in a broad sense, the issue of security every time we meet delegations. I can't tell you if, when they talk to each other, they have been discussing this matter or not. As I said, it's an early time yet.

Question: How important will be the conference for civilian society which starts tomorrow?

Answer: I think it's very important that there is this meeting and we're extremely grateful to the German government for making such a meeting possible. We need to create in Afghanistan a civil society – this is a first step. We want at the UN to encourage the creation of a civil society and without new institutions any political agreement would not survive, and therefore this is immensely important. Secondly, this meeting of the four delegations is, of course, incomplete. We had to gather as many people as we could under a formula that obviously would not satisfy everybody. And it's very good that there is this meeting now of the civil society, and hopefully we can build on this in future months.

Question: Back to security, I fully understand that we are in the early days, but hypothetically at least the UN must be discussing the problem if a political solution is made but a security situation isn't made how can this political council go back to Kabul and run the country. So my question is how can this happen and can it happen?

Answer: First of all, I didn't say that this issue isn't going to be discussed. I simply said that I was not aware that it was being discussed in the bilateral meetings the four groups are having. Of course it is very important, but, hypothetically, you could have an agreement amongst the Afghans in which they would agree they don't need the security force. I think that's unlikely, and I'm sure that the Afghan groups will have to think about this matter

Question: Did the delegations so far discuss the formation of a new government and what kind of government do they want? In the future Afghanistan will be as an Islamic state or democratic, or Islamic Emirate or Republic of Afghanistan?

Answer: In this meeting of four delegations there is no question of we deciding here the composition of the new Government of Afghanistan. What we are trying to decide here, if we can, would be two things. One, a road map to reach the time when through a free and fair election people will decide their form of government. We are trying here to set up a provisional or interim council. We don't even call it interim government, to make it very clear that this is simply a body that would be in existence in this very unusual situation when there really is no government in Afghanistan, and where we need to set the rules for the convening of the Loya Jirga. When the Loya Jirga meets, they will then go one step further and they will appoint a provisional administration or transitional administration, or government if you like. Still, at that point I doubt that there will be a decision whether Afghanistan should be an Islamic state, a monarchy, a republic, this is something that the constitutional body, possibly selected by the Loya Jirga, possibly established in some other way, will have to work out. And eventually there will be a draft constitution, which presumably will address these matters and that will then have to be for the people to decide whether they want this kind of constitution or not.

Question: Afghanistan still exists as an Islamic Republic, or what, in the future?

Answer: It's one of the many outcomes, but we do feel that whatever system is chosen, whether it's Islamic republic, republic, monarchy, there should be certain guiding principles that should guide this Constitution. Principles of human rights, respect for minorities, representative government and pluralism. And also respect for minorities.

Question: The man who I think that the UN still recognises as the President of Afghanistan said yesterday that he does not expect anything decisive to come out of these talks. Do you share his view?

Answer: I heard Professor Rabbani mentioning a variety of things. I think he doesn't want to raise expectations and I think he is entirely correct in that. I would hope that something important comes out because at least a first step that clearly is to be followed very soon by other steps is the minimum that we would hope to achieve and that the Afghans, I think, have the right to hope for, because the international community is expecting some kind of political progress if they are going to match this political progress with the kind of assistance that the Afghans want and that at the moment so many countries are prepared to give.

Question: Is he the President?

Answer: The United Nations General Assembly recognises the Islamic State of Afghanistan as the representative of Afghanistan at the UN.

Question: Mr Vendrell, you spoke of four to five days of discussion. Is that still the maximum length you are counting on even though many items may not have been discussed by then, by the weekend?

Answer: I think that in these kind of meetings it is impossible to give any precise date. If we say five days and we end up needing seven, people will think that we are slipping! I don't think that delegations after a bit in the same place meeting each other, they often find that they need a break or else they begin to hate each other, even though the hotel is an extremely desirable one. So, I don't think that we can expect this meeting to go on forever and there is a kind of, if you like, date looming on the horizon, which is the meeting in Berlin on the 5th of December of the Afghan Support Group. I would think that we would very much wish to have finished on a positive note before that meeting.

Question: We've heard this morning that the delegations are in a way blocked because the alliance doesn't know what to include in the power sharing process, the Peshawar group and the Cyprus group because they share the power with Iran and Pakistan, that they are willing to do. And secondly I would like to know about the role to be played by the King up there, are in a way linked with the restoration of the monarchy in Afghanistan?

Answer: On the first point, I have not heard anything about deadlocks or unwillingness on the part of any group to accept inclusion of any of the others. As I said, the atmosphere is good and there has been no intention to exclude anybody. As for restoration of the monarchy, I want to repeat it that the system of government must be decided at the

end of the entire process and that's pretty far down the road, and therefore for the moment there is no question of restoring the monarchy, establishing an Islamic system, or having a republic. It is something that is for the Afghans in the most democratic fashion to decide by themselves.

Question: Mr Vendrell, yesterday Mrs Gailani said that for the first time in her life she feels rather optimistic as far as women's conditions in her country are concerned. Is it possible to know, is the women's conditions an item in the conference and can you tell us a bit more about the role that women delegates are playing in the conference?

Answer: Well, the issue of social issues regarding human rights, the rights of women, ethnic groups, how the ethnic groups would coalesce in a provisional council, have not yet been addressed. This is not a conference about the whole of Afghanistan this is a meeting with a particular focus, which is how to we establish a very interim structure prior to the Loya Jirga. If it ever comes in this meeting to names or numbers, then I suppose that there will be some discussion. We will certainly encourage it as to the role of women, so I think that's as far as I would go. Of course she feels optimistic, and we also feel optimistic that things have changed in a way that it hadn't happened for 22 years and, therefore, I think that in this sense there is reason for hope.

Question: Mr Vendrell, can you confirm that the deputy Iranian Foreign Minister is due to arrive this evening in Bonn?

Answer: I am not aware that one of the deputy foreign ministers is due to arrive, but that does not necessarily mean this is happening or not. I just don't know.

Question: Mr Vendrell, (inaudible)... of the Northern Alliance has said that the Northern Alliance has agreed to a UN force, quote "If that must be the case". Is that your understanding?

Answer: If you didn't think that was clear enough, you should have asked her.

Question: Mr Vendrell, do you think that the political process could begin without a multinational force, without an agreement on this question?

Answer: In some ways the political process has started here by having these meetings. And the political process is not entirely conditional on the multinational force. We think a multinational force is highly desirable because it will assist in the work of any interim authority, it will assist in our work, it will also assist in the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Question: Mr Vendrell, I've got two questions. First one is that you have said that over here you are only looking at deciding on an interim administration. Now do you think that you can leave Bonn without some kind of understanding on the whole question of ethnicity, Pashtun versus Pashtun, even in that interim administration before you go on to that next phase? And my second question is, that there are delegations from Pakistan and Iran staying at the same hotel. Has there been any contact between these delegations and the four groups so that are here and do you think that that is helping this entire process? Thank you.

Answer: On the latter point, I don't follow the various meetings that outside delegations are having with the participants, I expect they probably have. That's why they sent representatives here. We hope that these foreign delegations are here to support what the Secretary-General is trying to do and we are trying to do and I think that there is no doubt that that is what they are here for. As for the first question, the issue of ethnicity, I have to repeat what I think I said in Kabul. The issue of ethnicity is raised more by outsiders than by Afghans. Of course the issue of representative ness of any structure in terms of the various ethnic groups will come up, or will be discussed. But you would be surprised how Afghans want first of all to think of themselves as Afghans and I haven't heard any of them count the number of Pashtuns and Tajiks that there are here. I think it's a mixed group. There may be some ethnic groups that feel a little bit disadvantaged but the issue is not as paramount for Afghans as it appears to have become for some outsiders.

Question: Do the delegations ever talk about the Taliban or the situation on the ground in Afghanistan?

Answer: They haven't talked about the Taliban with us, but again for all I know they have talked amongst themselves. But that has not been an issue that I have heard any talk about.

Question: Mr Vendrell, if these talks fail, then what?

Answer: I don't think, first of all, that these talks will fail. They have met. They are meeting now. The first meeting amongst Afghans of various persuasions for 23 years. The mere fact that they will continue to talk, means that this meeting is unlikely to fail from that point of view. It all depends on what you mean by failure, there may be not as much progress as some of you or some of us would hope, but I think that we all would hope that this is the beginning of a difficult road that must end with an agreement on the essentials for Afghanistan.

Question: I am an Uzbek. My question is follow up from the previous gentleman. If they don't agree on the interim provisional council, so what are the mechanisms at your disposal to make sure that they are, and secondly about the Security issues. What's your stance about the foreigners in Afghanistan like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, like Pakistani people, Arabs, perhaps prisoners of the war?

Answer: As I said before, let me say, we are not here as prophets and as sooth sayers, so I don't know but if we have some difficulties we will confront them. I am sure we will find a way to proceed. As for the foreigners, this is an issue which at the moment is very much in the hands of the coalition forces or the United Front. The Secretary-General and Mr Brahimi and I have talked to the coalition, to the United Front, to the ICRC, to the Red Cross, about this matter and that is as far as we can go ourselves.

Question: Mr Vendrell, there's a lot of pressure from the Americans and others to at least come out of here with an interim whatever you call it (Mr Vendrell: Interim authority), interim authority, that the international community can begin to work with for aid and so on. Obviously, you want that to happen too. Rabbani says that cannot happen here, it must happen in Afghanistan. Would you regard an ending here that results in another meeting in Kabul to settle this, as less than what you have wanted? I mean, I wouldn't use the word failure. And are you worried that if you let them go now, you won't be able to get them back together again anytime soon?

Answer: I don't think that having to wait for the final agreement to be signed at the next meeting would be a failure at all. Of course, we would like everything if possible and we will certainly have to make sure, and I think there are many ways of making sure, that if the delegates were to have to go, to leave here, that we have set a timetable for the next meeting.

Mr Ahmad Fawzi, Spokesman of the SRSG:

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. I'm sorry we didn't get to all of you. Maybe next time. Don't forget Mr Qanooni at 3.30 this afternoon, and there will be transcript of this press conference available in a few hours. Thank you very much.

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