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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.

This is day four, I'm sure you've all been counting, of the UN talks on Afghanistan, and the talks continue. This morning Mr Brahimi met with smaller groups of the four groups. We had a working meeting with the four group leaders and their immediate aides, two from each group, to take stock of where they stand after three days of talks. We have taken stock and they've all gone away to think about it a little more among themselves, and we will be meeting with them again this evening at 9 p.m. to try and formalize some of these agreements in principle, and see if we can't pin some agreements down.

There's going to be a meeting this afternoon at 3.30 with a delegation from the conference of Afghan Civil Society, which is going on near here, and which opened early this morning. A delegation of 10 at 3.30 p.m. this afternoon will meet with all the Afghan groups in their entirety. We'll also have pictures of that for you.

The planning and efforts on behalf of the UN system in Afghanistan continue. As you know we have humanitarian aid workers from the UN system and all the NGOs who are doing wonderful work in Afghanistan still delivering aid throughout the country. But yesterday I mentioned Mark Malloch Brown from UNDP would be in Islamabad and Kabul talking about recovery, so the system is already planning, UNDP, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, planning what is going to happen after the Bonn talks and after the political agreement. All this can only happen after there's a political agreement and after there's peace and stability in the country.

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF, was in Kabul today, it's in the briefing notes in the back, but because we've had so many questions about the participation of women. I would like to inform you that Carol Bellamy is also pushing that and her basic message for Afghanistan is that in order to really recover and thrive as a society children and women must be an immediate priority.

And now I would be happy to take your questions.

Question: Would you clarify the withdrawal of this Pashtun leader, number two of the Alliance?

Answer: Haji Qadir is a Pashtun as you quite rightly said, and I believe he left because of some misunderstandings within his own delegation, and also because he was unhappy about the level of Pashtun representation at the conference. We are very sorry to see him go. We hope that he may play a role in some future administration in Afghanistan, but the conference continues and "the show must go on".

Question: We heard just now from the Cyprus group that they're optimistic about an agreement by tomorrow. You said three to five days, what's your view about that?

Answer: It's the counting game again. Yes, you're quite right, but you have to give it some structure, and we are hoping to conclude a deal as we agreed with all the parties, and they were very happy to agree to this time limit. We did it with them; we didn't impose anything upon them. If they had said we'd like less time or more time, it would have been entirely up to them. But, to answer your question directly, yes we are working towards concluding an agreement by tomorrow. That doesn't mean the crack of dawn tomorrow, tomorrow is 24 hours, tomorrow ends at midnight tomorrow. But let me just add this: if we find that they're making progress and that they need a few

minutes after midnight tomorrow, then we're flexible, there's no reason why we should not stay until Sunday. But then again, let me say, we don't want to impose more than we have to on our German hosts. They have been extremely generous and this is just one example of their generosity: this kind of press centre is an enormous effort in labour and in cost, and what's going on up there on the hill in Petersberg is also quite remarkable. The facilities that have been put at the disposal of this conference are quite remarkable and we thank the German government for them and we do not want to impose more than we have to, but if we need an extra day, we'll get an extra day.

Question: Mr Fawzi, could you help us understand how Mr Brahimi is working? Give us a flavour of the negotiations, and, if possible, could you drag him down here sometime soon? It would be nice to see him as well.

Answer: I have been trying and you must understand that he's very busy. It might happen, you never know. I'm working on it. But to give you a flavour, yes, I'd be very happy to do so. When we reach a successful conclusion, I have no doubts that Mr Brahimi would like to announce it himself. How does he work? As you know, from day one, right after the opening ceremony, his preference was to leave it informal. Informal with occasional structure, there's a loose structure. He has left the groups to their own devices, they meet, they each have separate meeting rooms, so there's the Peshawar room, the Rome room, the Cyprus room, and the United Front room. They meet in their rooms, and whenever they need to consult with their friends in any of the other groups they meet with them in the other groups. They can also come together in as a group in a larger conference room that is in the vicinity of those four rooms, that have been set aside in Petersberg. This goes on for a few hours every day. Then, one or two of them would want to consult with Mr Brahimi or someone on Mr Brahimi's team, on Mr Brahimi's team there are experts on Afghanistan, United Nations officials who have dealt with this problem for a long time, and they come in to see Mr Brahimi or any one of his team, and then they go back and continue consultations. At least once every 24 hours Mr Brahimi gets them all together and takes stock of where they stand so that the United Nations team can evaluate how much progress, if any, is being made, and if necessary, provide some advice or guidance in order to nudge them in the right direction.

Question: That is helpful, but could you give us an example, for instance, of where he has decided to nudge and push.

Answer: No, sorry.

Question: Yesterday you told us that the delegation was writing some sort of list of members for the Interim Administration and the Supreme Council. How many women are on those lists?

Answer: We haven't seen the lists yet, but they have been encouraged by us and by other parties – you know they met a European women's delegation yesterday – to include as many women as possible in those lists.

Question: Has the United Nations already started investigating or maybe planning to investigate about the massacre, which happened near Mazar-i-Sharif, about the prisoners of war?

Answer: I'm sorry, I don't know whether we are going to launch an investigation, I don't have that information for you. I'd be happy to check it and let you know during the briefing tomorrow. Or if you'd like to call me later, but it's a situation throughout the country that's very troubling, because the lack of security is also hindering the distribution of humanitarian aid in many places in Afghanistan.

Journalists interrupts: "... (inaudible) prisoners of war".

Answer: I'm changing the subject here. I said I would get back to you, and I'd like to address the issue of security, which is obstructing humanitarian aid in some of the corridors that we can't get through, hence the importance of making some provision for security in the Bonn agreement.

Question: Are you and officials at any level anywhere discussing the possibility of putting together an international force for Kabul or elsewhere in Afghanistan, roads, for humanitarian convoys? And, should we hear tomorrow that an international force should be necessary, would the UN then consider such discussions about putting together some kind of UN international force.

Answer: Yes, we will consider putting together an international security presence, both military and civilian police in Kabul and wherever else it's needed throughout Afghanistan, once the Afghans themselves ask us to do so. We are not going to do anything without the permission of the Afghans, but it is an issue on the agenda, both the security of Kabul and its immediate environment and elsewhere in Afghanistan. But the most important thing for us is to have the agreement of all the Afghan parties on the composition and mandate of such a force.

Question: On the same topic, we've been told that the Northern Alliance has perhaps moved a little bit closer to this idea of accepting it. But, as of today, has there been any really serious tackling of this issue, and are the parties really moving forward at all on it?

Answer: The focus so far has been on the creation of the Interim Authority. There have been discussions about the importance of security, but I believe that the focus has been mostly on the structure, the composition, and the formation of the Interim Authorities, both the Interim Supreme Council and the Interim Administration. The question of security, while being recognised as being of paramount importance, has still not been discussed in any great details, and, as you know, the devil is in the details. Finding the right people to sit on these councils and run the country in an Interim Administration has not been an easy task; finding the right person to be a Head of State, if you will, or to head the Supreme Council, again, is a question of finding agreement between the parties. There's unanimity on a few things, like the need to create a new government to take over in Kabul, which is a little more representative of the people of Afghanistan, in order to go through this interim period into a transitional period which will eventually lead to a much broader-based multi-ethnic government, but there still isn't consensus on who these people should be. And that's what we're working on at the moment, with all the parties. The issue of security has not gone away, it's still there, it is of paramount importance and we have to resolve it in one shape or form, while we're here in Bonn.

Question: (inaudible) ... the talks because he felt the Pashtun were not enough represented. I would like to ask you a more general question on the issue of ethnicity. Is this one of the major items, or points, or difficulties being discussed up there? Is this one of those devilish details you are telling us about? Is there a discussion on ethnic quarters in the two interim governing bodies or rather the governing body and the legislative body? So how much is ethnicity part of the difficulties in trying to reach an overall agreement?

Answer: Well let me be frank with you. We don't sit in on their discussions. We as the UN don't sit in while they are having their heated discussions about who should do what in which administration. They are coming up with criteria for the selection of their representatives. And these criteria must be based on geographical and ethnic and regional considerations. So the question in its broad sense is a part of the negotiation for an agreement but whether it's one of the devils in the detail, I don't know.

Question: You said that the show must go on, but what is the assessment on the hill as to how damaging his departure is?

Answer: The assessment on the hill. Do you know, I really don't feel that his departure is going to affect the talks one way or another. We're sorry he's gone because he could have made a valuable contribution to the talks at the moment as part of the United Front delegation, and as I said earlier, I do hope that he will agree to join a future administration as part of a broader-based multi-ethnic administration. But I don't see any major setback as a result of his departure. People are not talking about it all day. He's gone, and we have work to do.

Do you want to follow up on that?

Question: ... (inaudible) When did he leave? This morning?

Answer: You know I don't follow them all around all the time. I don't follow them all around any time. But I heard about his departure last night. I was told that he was leaving and it must have been about 7 o'clock in the evening. But I don't know if he left at that time, or if he got up in the morning and left. I'm sorry I don't have details on the leaving.

Question: (Start of question inaudible) ... hope that he might be part of the future administration. Was his name being mentioned for one of the cabinet posts, and also when you finish this conference do you expect that the names for the supreme council and the administration posts will be announced?

Answer: I don't know if his name is on the list, but nice try. I haven't seen the list, Jim; none of us have seen the lists. They are still under lock and key. If the names are available at the end of this conference, they will be available to all.

Question: We were told by the delegation from the Cyprus group just before you appeared here that Mr Qadir had promised to respect and fulfil any agreement that's reached here. Is that your understanding as well?

Answer: I haven't had a chance to discuss it with Haji Qadir but I'd certainly hope that he does respect what comes out of Bonn because his leaders are saying so back in Kabul, that they will respect anything that comes out of Bonn.

Question: Mr Rabbani is quoted as telling a news conference in Kabul today that there should be elections to the two bodies, the Supreme Council and the Interim Administration. He suggests that these elections can be organised in as little as two months. And he is also proposing that there should be up to 200 international peacekeepers, as he puts it apparently, to guarantee the security of exiles returning to Kabul. What is your reaction to both of those things, and how do they square with the latest stand that the Northern Alliance is taking in the talks here today?

Answer: Well, we would be very happy to see elections anytime in Afghanistan, but I'm not sure that two months is realistic. Of course in principle it's a wonderful idea. On the question of peacekeepers, the numbers haven't been discussed yet, they haven't discussed how many they feel they need and we haven't made any proposals so we haven't discussed any figures yet.

Question: We hear that yesterday the Northern Alliance and the Roman people [Rome group] made an agreement on creating the Interim Administration, Interim Council. It seems that all four factions came to an agreement to set up those two functions, two organisations. Is this clear, I mean although the names and numbers are not decided yet? I want to double confirm that all four factions came to the agreement that Interim Administration and Interim Council can exist.

Answer: Yes, I can confirm to you without any doubt that the four parties have agreed in principle that there should be a new authority in Kabul. Both the Interim Supreme Council and the Interim Administration.

Question: My understanding of what Mr Rabbani said in Kabul today at the news conference is that the Interim Authority should be decided in elections in Kabul, in Afghanistan, and he also complains of pressure on his delegation here, saying that they've been coerced perhaps into agreeing to certain point, the Interim Council and security. Given his comments, how confident are you that whatever is decided here at the conference can be implemented on the ground in Afghanistan?

Answer: We have Mr Rabbani's word that he will respect whatever comes out of the Bonn talks and once the Bonn agreement is concluded, we have been assured by the head of the delegation here, Mr Qanooni, that he will take it home to Kabul and implement it. We can only take their word for it.

Question: If you haven't seen the names, what are you talking about with these groups? And also what language are these discussions between Mr Brahimi and the delegations going on in?

Answer: We are talking about the structure of these entities. We are talking about the Supreme Council, we are talking about numbers on each entity, how many in the Supreme Council, how many in the Administration, how they should move forward on deciding what role each body should have. We are talking about the need for security and we are at a stage now where we are waiting for them to get approval on their lists of names. The language that is being spoken when Mr Brahimi is in the room is a mixture of English, Persian, and Pashtun and we have simultaneous interpreters.

Question: What languages does Mr Brahimi speak?

Answer: He speaks English, and Arabic occasionally.

Question: You said that yesterday some of the delegates said that their most important criteria for the Council would be the geographical. From the words that you said before I understood that ethnic criteria would be as important as the regional in the formation of the Council.

Answer: Well it's an important issue from the start that we have a multi-ethnic broad-based government, so it is one of the items that has to be taken into consideration when the choice of delegates is being made, when the choice of members of these two councils is being made.

Question: Clearly Ahmad there has been a sea change in the positive nature of these talks in the last 24 hours, could you try and identify the one or more reasons for that? What has happened up there that has made the whole atmosphere so different in the last 24 hours?

Answer: I think it is the nature of any political negotiations. You start off with a euphoric note, they get together in the opening ceremony and make lovely speeches, there's a lot of polite talk and civilised backslapping, and then they get down to the nitty-gritty. And we've been in the nitty-gritty for three days; it doesn't mean that there are major obstacles that we are trying to break down. But we are trying to reconcile differing positions on some of the issues. I've been very careful to try not to overplay the euphoria of the opening day. There was a lot, as Vendrell told you the other day, these people hadn't seen each other in many years. Some of them went to school together, so they were catching up and there was a lot of camaraderie going on and dining together in the same hall, or rather breaking the fast together in the same dining hall, and sitting in comfortable chairs in the lobby and having a coffee after 'iftar'. There was a lot of that going on. Then on the second day the hard work began and you get bogged down in the details and you spend long nights and get very little sleep, and get up in the morning and go through it again, and we are all getting a bit tired, physically exhausted, so I wouldn't say that there's been a sea change in what's going on, in the mood. But there are ups and downs in every process.

Question: Most of the stuff that you said today sounds to me, if I got it right, pretty much like the stuff that you said yesterday, so has there been any progress and if so, what is the progress?

Answer: I am going to have to find a few more lines! It probably sounds like the stuff I said the day before yesterday, too. I think that the sides have come closer to an agreement, but how much closer remains the issue. We are inching forward here, inch by inch, towards an acceptable agreement. Towards an agreement that is acceptable to all four. And we do not want to have an agreement that is not going to be implemented or respected by all four and especially by the party in Kabul by the United Front. This is a great opportunity but also a great responsibility. It's a great opportunity because we can turn around the suffering of the past couple of decades and take Afghanistan into a new age, but it's a great responsibility for the leaders up there on the hill because if they make the wrong decisions, then they will fail their people one more time. And that is what we are trying to avoid.

Thank you.

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