

Königswinter, 29 November 2001

**PRESS BRIEFING BY PROF. ABDUL SATTAR SIRAT, HEAD OF THE ROME GROUP DELEGATION,
AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE DELEGATION**

Following is a near-verbatim transcript of the English interpretation of today's briefing at 7 pm Bonn time by Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat, Head of the Rome group delegation, and other members of the delegation:

Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat:

In the name of God, the compassionate and merciful, I am happy to say hello on behalf of His Majesty the former King of Afghanistan, King Mohamed Zahir Shah, and I would like to welcome you all. I am happy that you have paid attention to the importance of our national issue by gathering in this historic city of Bonn. This is a national and international issue and human issue.

This series of historic meetings in Bonn, in a city of a country which has had very friendly relations with us in the past. Once again I would like to thank the Federal Republic of Germany and its generous people and also would like to thank you very much for coming here and now I am ready to take your questions.

Question: We understand that there is a general acceptance among the four groups represented here for the King to play some role in the future government of Afghanistan. Can you tell me what sort of role that will be and when you see the King going back to his home country?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): His Majesty the former King is the spiritual leader of Afghanistan and is the secret, and is the core, for national unity among the people. His role in the future of Afghanistan depends on the decision of the Afghan people and in the coming meeting, which is going to take place on behalf of the Afghan people. The proposal of our delegation in the Bonn meeting is that His Majesty should play a focal point, should have the central role, in the future of Afghanistan.

His Majesty will play the role of the Head of State, or Head of the Supreme Council for the National Unity of Afghanistan.

Question: Is the Rome delegation prepared to allow the Northern Alliance to have a larger proportional share of the seats in the interim authority and the supreme council in exchange for the King returning as the Head of State in the transitional leadership?

Membership in the council is based on criteria which have to do with the geographical, ethnic and other issues, and also cultural issues.

There is no question about sharing or about division of power. Every decision should be based on realities within Afghanistan.

Question (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): There are two questions, one is about the form of government, whether it will be a monarchy or a republic and the second question was about the role of women, whether women will have an equal role as men in the future society?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): We are not planning to restore monarchy and kingdom in Afghanistan, and the form of government, whether it be kingdom or republic or whatever, it will depend on the decision of the council, or the Loya Jirga, and as far as the role of women is concerned, now the women should have an equal role and I refer you to Mrs Sima Wali, who is here and she can give you more answers. When I was a member of the government during His Majesty, women had a very active and equal role and the Constitution had made this clear, and it will be the same in the future as well.

Mrs Sima Wali: Thank you for asking that question, we must make sure that these questions are consistently asked, and should have been asked throughout the process, that Afghan women's rights were taken away from them. As Mr Sirat pointed out, His Majesty, the former King, has a very strong role with regard to the status of women in the Afghan society. The Afghan Constitution guaranteed equal rights for Afghan women and women played a role in drafting the Constitution and were also involved in the Parliament. I've had very strong roles growing up as an Afghan woman in Afghanistan. Women have been active in all sectors of our society. Governmental as well as non-governmental sectors. I have been received very positively here. I am here to represent the voices and aspirations of my Afghan sisters who have remained inside Afghanistan and who have resisted throughout the process of the wars, and especially under the Taliban regime where women were subjected to heinous crimes against humanity. Our Constitution was negated and women's rights were basically taken away from them. We are confident that this era has ended and I am confident that His Majesty the former King has people who will be chosen to function in all levels of a future Afghanistan – who will ensure that women play a prominent role. I have a formal statement in writing from His Majesty the former King in this regard, and I am pleased that we have that statement that we will make sure that that statement is followed both in principle and in practice.

Question: With your permission Mr Sirat, I would like to address my question to Mr Mostapha Zaher, the only member of the royal family who is here, and my question is: so far we have just heard about the former King and his willingness to return to Afghanistan to unify the divided country. Could you tell us what is the mood among the rest of the members of your family, and especially a generation such as yours who has never seen Afghanistan because there has been criticism that the younger people going back to the tough realities of Afghanistan – it's a destroyed country – would find it very hard to adjust to Afghanistan. Is it something you have discussed among yourselves? What is the mood? Is the family going to move back to Afghanistan? Is it going to be small groups, can you please tell me something about that?

Answer (Mr Mostapha Zaher): Thank you very much for your question. You said that we were not grown up in Afghanistan. I was born in Afghanistan and raised in Afghanistan up to the age of 10, and I remember it very well. To answer your second question, this is not a family affair; this is to save the noble nation of Afghanistan and the long-suffering people of Afghanistan from a long nightmare. And I think that we have a historical opportunity at hand, a golden opportunity, after 22 years of suffering, of destruction, of killings, that our people can come together in brotherhood and in harmony to lay the foundations of a new Afghanistan whereby the rights of everybody is enshrined in the Constitution. Where everybody lives in peace and harmony with one another, where the rights of our women are restored, their honour and their dignity, where we can once again see the smile on the faces of the people of Afghanistan. So this is not an issue for my family – when I return I shall return as an Afghan individual, as an Afghan citizen, and I long to return back to my homeland. I think that's the right of every Afghan, man and woman, to return to their country for its reconstruction and rehabilitation.

There is no doubt about the fact that His Majesty the former King is very popular among the Afghan nation. And also there is no doubt about the fact that he can play a very important role in the future of Afghanistan.

Question: But don't you think that in the long term that free elections, in order to ensure the free will of the Afghan people, is more appropriate because Loya Jirga will sort of take this ability of the Afghans to ensure this free future in the long term.

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): After 22 years of war, holding free elections according to the norms and standards of western democracies is impossible. Afghanistan is in an emergency situation, a situation which should start everything from zero. The emergency Loya Jirga is, we can say, neither selective nor elective and it's taking place in an emergency situation.

It's only to organise the transitional period.

Question: Could you please be more precise about the return of the former King as a Head of State or Head of the Supreme Council? To which supreme council do you refer to? To the interim one that will be set in Bonn, to the transitional one that will take place after the Jirga, or the definite one that will take place probably after the election in two years?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): There are two legal institutions which are planned to be formed, and the role of His Majesty the King will be clarified. These two institutions: one is the Supreme Council for the National Unity of Afghanistan and the second one is the interim administration.

In principle we have agreed on the formation of these two institutions. The thing which remains, which still needs to be decided upon, is the composition, the list of the people and how they should be formed.

Question. The thing is that it doesn't answer my question. I understand the two different bodies that have to be set in Bonn, and I understood that one of them is an interim body and the other one is a transitional one and the other one is after the elections, probably the definite one. I would like to know precisely when the former King will come into the game. He will be there in January once the meeting takes place in Kabul, or the springtime after Loya Jirga, it will be after the elections in two years time? To which particular time?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): This is the agenda, which was prepared by the United Nations you are talking about. We have a separate discussion in Afghani consultation, it is not decided yet until now. We would like to have one transitional period, no three-month interim institution after Loya Jirga transitional period. Our proposal is that we'll have one transitional period. There would be a government or transitional administration in Supreme Council of National Unity. Both institutions will be established at the same time and His Majesty the former King will be the Head of the Supreme Council of National Unity and at the same time the Head of the State. And he will go inshallah with the establishment of both institutions to Afghanistan.

Question: The question is to Mrs Sima Wali, do you agree that the rights of women be given to them on the basis of Islamic principle, according to which the women have half the right of men?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): The answer to this has clearly to do with the holy Koran and there are clear guidelines about the role of women and men.

You give an example that the right of women is less than of man. There are so many other examples, other examples, that woman is more than man. If you study the right of man and woman, when man and woman are married the man will pay the 'mahar' and he will pay the 'nafaqah', too. Man will have more expenses to woman, than the woman. (Laughter.)

Mrs Sima Wali: First of all this is not the proper venue for this discussion. It's a very philosophical and religious discussion. There are various interpretations with regard to the rights that are granted to women in Islam. Islam has granted many rights to women, it's a question of interpretation and it's a question of women, Muslim, jurists, feminists and scholars, who are in the process of interpreting these very controversial means and practices. It has to do with that our problem is very much relevant to the cultural norms and the practices, especially under the Taliban, that were used to keep women from gaining access to society's resources, using Islam and Afghan culture to cloak the fender-apartheid policies. The Afghan society, as many societies, is very diverse; there are many diverse viewpoints. For example, it's a society in transition. We have lost – many of our rights have been taken away from us and at this point some Afghan women believe that they should wear Islamic dress and some women choose not to. It's a question of choice in this. It's a transitioning society and I don't think at this point, what is relevant to the Afghan women is that they are so mired deeply into poverty. The question of getting out of poverty is the question of security. They have been subjected to gross human rights violations. Right now you are talking about a situation that is not very relevant to a situation that Afghan women are facing. There's a crisis situation, an emergency situation. I can assure you that we have powerful and strong Afghan women who will take on these difficult debates and will choose for themselves, we don't want men to dictate to us, so I don't want you telling me what I should think or what I should practice. I know what my religion says and I know what my culture says. I as a woman have a right, and I have a right to argue, there's the issue of 'ijtihad' in Islam and I as a Muslim woman, and as an Afghan woman, have the right to use the 'ijtihad' and make the decision myself.

Question: In the case that there are difficulties for a supreme council, if the former King is not accepted as Head of the Supreme Council, is your delegation ready to accept someone else as the Head of the Supreme Council?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): He has declared himself so many times in so many years that he is in the service of the nation. He will respect any decision made by the people of Afghanistan.

Question: There were two questions, one was that we do not have enough statistics on Afghanistan's many aspects of their life, and how could we make a rational decision about the construction or politics and the like. Secondly, women have been denied participation in economic activity for a long period and that essentially more than half of the resources of that country, or at least human resources of the country, have been literally thrown out. What are your concerns and possible policies and whether have you thought about that. Is that correct?

Answer (Dr Nadiri?): The issue is just that I would not contest the basis of the principle that statistics and information is essential for any policy-making and we should have it, and this is a major task for reconstruction of the country. A first and foremost element, but the country has been basically devastated. This is a country that both its human, physical and cultural capital has been destroyed. So we have to start again. We would welcome all the statistical agencies of major Western countries, the United Nations as well as the World Bank to start and help the Afghans to get a proper statistics on all aspects of the economy, political aspects, as well as population, we do need that. We do have certain amount of information from the past, and we are only estimating what there is now, but it is an estimate. So we welcome that, and we certainly are planning to look into that and the plan that the Afghans are trying to look into will be based on the current statistics but a statistical analysis will be a major part of it.

Second, as far as the women are concerned, the issue of half of the resources of the country and the most important part of the women's contribution, which is in training of children, which is the next generation, as well as their own aspiration for jobs and participation as our leader mentioned, if we even go to 1973, one of the great contribution of that law was that there was a guarantee in practice, as well as in deed, the equal pay for equal work, which is somewhat even now, in the United States, where I teach, we still are struggling to get. So there are many plans and many activities to perform and we are welcome to do that.

Question: Is there any role for the Hindus in Afghanistan?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): They are a part of the Afghan nation, they have the full rights of the Afghan citizens in Afghan nation, and they will participate in the Supreme Council of the national unity.

Question: Could we know how the dialogue is going up there on the Petersberg? Are you satisfied with the daily meetings you have?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): Until now I am satisfied, there is no any difficulty till now.

Question: Will you find an agreement before the end of this week? Second question: what is the most particular point it's very difficult to find an agreement between, among the four different groups in Bonn?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): Well, we hope that we will have an agreement by Saturday. We did not face any difficult point until now. The difficult job is how to select the members of the Supreme Council and the members of the administration, so this will be an important job. We hope we can do this.

Question: How many women will be in your list for the interim administration?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): There is no certain number until now, we haven't decided yet. But there will be women.

Mrs Sima Wali: I'm here to make sure that that happens.

Question: What is the minimum agreement you would like to see reached here? Do you just want a list of names for the council, do you want some understanding about the role of the King, and do you want some agreement on peacekeeping? And the second question is: what role do you see for Mr Rabbani. One idea we've heard is that the King could be Head of the Council, Rabbani Head of the Cabinet, and is Rabbani on any of the lists that you've seen as a member of the council?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): It's up to the Supreme Council of the National Unity what role will be given to what person. We don't know anything about it. The only thing that we know, his majesty the former King, has an important and central role. What we already reached in agreement, the principle of the establishment, forming the Supreme Council of the National Unity and forming the transitional government also. And also about the security force, that is a very important issue of our meeting. We feel there is an urgent need to have an international security force placed in Kabul in the present time.

Question: Two questions: First question is exactly referring to what you say: peacekeeping forces. It looks like there are major differences between the groups deliberating here in the conference. First of all, will there be foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan as peacekeeping or peace-enforcing forces? What is your opinion about that? And the second question is: let's assume the former King will be reinstated, or will come back to Afghanistan as Head of State or in any other leading capacity. You know, as we all know, that two of your neighbouring countries, namely Iran and Pakistan, would be very, very unhappy the former King reinstated in any capacity in Afghanistan. Would that be a heavy burden from the very beginning for any government in Afghanistan concerning your relationship with your two important neighbours?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): Well about the security forces, Dr Nadiri will answer. The second part of your question, the issue of Iran and Pakistan, I think the issue is an Afghan national issue and we respect the national interests of our neighbouring countries and we are sure that they should also respect our national interests in principle.

Dr Nadiri: Can I just go on a bit further about the role of Iran and Pakistan? I note with satisfaction I have attended meetings with the delegation of Pakistan last night and also with the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. We talked in depth about cross-border problems that existed in the past and the social problems of today. I did not get the impression that they are vehemently against any role for the former King. As a matter of fact, they said that they would respect the free will of the Afghan people, whomever they wish to have for their future; they will go by that and respect that. So your assessment is not correct.

I just want to add that the role of these two neighbouring countries, the important thing to remember is that the Afghan peace is essential for the stability and welfare of these countries as well. The best method we have come to is that if the King comes and plays a central role to start the process of peace and establish peace this will help these countries as well. So we are, and I think they are coming to the understanding that that is the way to go, and still we have some ways to go further. But the interest of Afghanistan and the interest of the neighbouring countries lie in the peace and prosperity of Afghanistan.

On the issue of the security: we think that there is a need for some international force in Afghanistan, while the Afghans develop their security forces and others as it goes on. It primarily will be in Kabul, but it could very well entail staying in some other parts of Afghanistan as well. And as far as peacemaking and peacekeeping, we envisage that in terms of peacekeeping, and we hope that we can resolve the elements and the parameters of the peacemaking among the Afghans through the institutions that we talked about and the presence of the former King.

Question: Let's assume you come to a conclusion about the interim government here by the end of the week; let's also assume that you won't have an agreement on international security force: Will your members go to Kabul to the first meeting, even without an international presence in Kabul?

Answer (Dr Nadiri): What we are doing here is to form those two organs of the state that we mentioned for this time of emergency situation. The key issue is that for this interim government to work, the security for their activities as well as function must be guaranteed, so we would very much like to see simultaneously this issue is addressed, and hopefully we come to an agreement thereof.

Question: For the past ten years, political power in Afghanistan has been determined by who has the best army. You don't have an army. Are you at all worried that any agreement that you reach here will become mute, irrelevant, once you arrive in Afghanistan to help govern the country?

Answer (Speaker unclear): You're right that the main political force in the past in Afghanistan has been the military force. And it is right also that we don't have military forces. But we have something more important than military force, which is the support of the majority of the Afghan people from every side of Afghanistan, from every sector of the Afghan society. You know that the Afghan people are sick and tired of war. There is tremendous inside Afghanistan for peace, and I think that is the major force that we have, and I think all Afghans, including people who have fought for any reason have realised the time of war is gone and now there is time of peace and there is no client for any war-making people in Afghanistan.

Question: With regard to the fact that you will have democracy in the future of Afghanistan: what is your thinking about the fact that Iran is not a democracy and what plans do you have in order to defend your democracy as far as Iran is concerned?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): I don't agree that Iran is against democracy or the enemy of democracy so seriously. Our wish is to have friendly cooperation with all neighbours, including the Islamic Republic of Iran. ... (inaudible)

Question: Over the past ten years, Afghanistan has developed as a major supplier of heroine in the world and a lot of money is being made that way. How will you make sure that this will stop?

Answer (Speaker unclear): This is true and this is an obligation that the new government has to face over time. The central way to handle this thing will be to restore the Afghan agriculture, which has been a major source of income to a lot of people who have gone into poppy cultivation, and also to provide the incentives to cultivate another activities which constitute alternatives and if the political and other institutions of the country is reinstalled, the government inauguration and serious fight against such a cultivation would also be part of the programme.

(Dr Nadiri) If I can just add to that, I think that it is very important for the international community to help in this matter, because it's not just an Afghan problem. Once it gets out of Afghanistan it's distributed across the world, I think the international community has a responsibility to help the farmers of Afghanistan for substitute crops. Not only that, it also a matter of simple economics, supply and demand: enough education should be given to the youth here as well that it's a terrible thing, it should not be consumed. But also on that end we should try to put an end to this material that is being produced and being shot into the veins of young people – it's a tragedy. But it also is not just the Afghans themselves that we have to deal with this, we have problems there, but also, friends in the international community must help us overcome this matter. So it's an international matter and Afghanistan needs a lot of help in this matter. Once our institutions are put into place, once we have a functioning government, once our forces of law and order are in place, these things take time, and we need international help in this regard.

Question: The question was about the fact that most of the Afghan intellectuals and enlightened people are not in south Afghanistan and are not involved in the political groups, so they're not present in this process of negotiations, so how will you make sure that they will have a role in the future government?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): He graciously mentioned that some intellectual Afghans or some academic Afghans are involved in our group and in other groups as well.

Dr. Nadiri: What I wanted to add was that the effort would be made to all these groups in all the countries, whether a specific set of requests and call for service so that they can voluntarily organize themselves and participate the way they see fit, and we have to be able to integrate their services with the new government's needs.

Question: The question was about the struggle as far as the reform for the rights of women fore the role of women in society is concerned and the struggle in this way, and the gentleman was making the point that 8 years ago this struggle in Afghanistan was actually started. The question is to Ms Sima Wali on what she thinks in this regard?

Answer (Mrs Sima Wali): There is no doubt that we have a very difficult struggle ahead of us. It's going to be very hard, but we have Afghan women who are ready and willing to be part of the struggle. I am in touch with the Afghan women's leadership, the community grassroots leadership's, hundreds of Afghan women who have stayed inside Afghanistan, who have organized their communities in the absence when we for the 22 years when we have not had a central government, and these Afghan women at grave risk to themselves and their families, organized their communities to provide the services that normally a government should provide, and some of them even under the rule of the Taliban had provided these services clandestinely, so we have had women who have resisted throughout the process, Afghan women are referring to their struggle as their own Jihad for social justice and for justice and peace and for freedom.. So we are involved in this jihad, we have not sat idle in the past 23 years. I have advocated for the rights of women and for the civil society sector for the past 22 years, and I am not about to give up. It has been a long and hard process. I have pleading for the voices of Afghan women, for the past 22 years. The problems of Afghan women will not go away immediately, we have to address it in a long-term situation and we have to recognise that Afghanistan is now a changed society, and we must ensure that Afghan women have the choice. Some of them have actually adopted to wear the 'Chaduri', the on-enveloping dress. It should be a matter of choice. We should not judge Afghan women if they choose to wear the Chaduri and if they choose to function under certain principles to judge them differently. They are sisters; we must work in tandem with each other. Afghanistan is a nation of widows right now and a nation of female beggars. We have a very difficult struggle to transform our society into a nation right now, where ... I mean we are very behind in the information age. Many Afghan women are saying we have been so isolated; we have been abandoned for these past 22 years. Now the world is paying attention to us and we have Afghan women right now, some of us are represented in this process, willing and able to sit at the negotiation tables. Even though we are not invited, some of us are demanding, if we do not get invited at the tables where discourses on reconstruction are taking place, we are demanding to sit at these tables, because we constitute a large majority of the Afghan society. But Afghanistan, like all societies, is a diverse society and we must respect that.

Question: Through today, the news agencies have been reporting that your delegation and the delegation of the Northern Alliance have reached a breakthrough agreement on the structure of the two administrative bodies, the interim administration and the Supreme Council, and that you have agreed a division of seats in those bodies. Can you confirm whether that's true, can you say whether you would assess it as a breakthrough and how does the United Nations, who is chairing this conference, and the other two delegations, regard that?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): That's true that we have reached an agreement in principle of forming these two institutions, but not in all details. We are working on the number of the members and also the names of the members. And the other groups will participate also, we will consult them, and they will participate in forming these two institutions.

Question: One more time about the role of the former King. When is he going to play a bigger role - after the meeting of the Loya Jirga in spring or before?

Answer (Prof. Abdul Sattar Sirat): He has always the central role in the future of Afghanistan, so he is, as I mentioned before, he is the father of our nation, and he will go to Afghanistan regarding to the decision of the Afghan people, starting from this Supreme Council of the National Unity, and also any role given by the Loya Jirga, he will accept also.

(Speaker unclear): I would like to add in this matter, that his majesty the former King has already started for some time his role of the unifying factor in the Afghan society. During this war in Afghanistan against terrorism, he has been in contact with the different factions, recommending them to not loot or not kill the other people. He has been through his adviser mediated between different factions, encouraging to surrender, the people should not massacre, he advised lots of people to not take acts of revenge. So I just wanted to mention that his role as a symbol of Afghan unity and a unifying factor has already been started.

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