

**Statement by Maxime Verhagen, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, at the 'International Conference on Afghanistan: a Comprehensive Strategy in a Regional Context', World Forum, 31 March 2009**

Mr President, Mr Secretary-General, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Men and women in Afghanistan have been suffering for decades; this conference can not change their fate overnight. Children in Afghanistan have been denied opportunities; this conference cannot instantly make up for that. And people who mourn, because they have lost their loved ones in the struggle for a better Afghanistan; we must recognize that this conference cannot compensate them for their loss...

But what this conference *can* do, what *we* can do - united as we are today - , we can make the right choices for a democratic Afghanistan. For an Afghanistan:

- which is at peace and secure in its region;
- in which there is no free haven for terrorists.
- an Afghanistan that is able to maintain its security and stability with decreasing outside assistance.
- a democracy where human rights are respected,
- and economic development is sustained.

In order to achieve this Afghanistan, we have to make serious choices. The challenge is not just eliminating some individual terrorists. It is far more complex - as we have found out. At the moment, we are at a crossroads. We must learn from our actions in the past and we must explore new ideas for the future. We must decide which way to go.

Soon millions of Afghans will cast their votes in only their second democratic presidential and parliamentary elections. When they make their choices for the years to come, they need to know what they may expect from us, the international community. Equally, our soldiers and citizens need to know our longer term strategy and perspective. And of course they also need to know what they can expect from the Afghans.

Today we must start work on the successor of the Afghan Compact, which will expire next year. What we need is a new Afghan Bond. A bond which unites

- both Afghan citizens and their government;
- which unites Afghans, their neighbours and international partners;
- and governments and non-governmental partners.

This Afghan Bond must re-new and re-energize the political determination of us all to achieve our goals. It will give us the perspective of an Afghanistan that will be able to provide for itself. Needing less and less outside assistance.

What are the steps we should take today? I see four priority actions.

Firstly, security. The build up of Afghan security forces is progressing, most visibly in the National Army. Yet, the build up of police forces must be sped up. The Afghan Government is committed to that, and the European Union and NATO are exploring how to accelerate their mentoring efforts. Building up the police forces is urgent, as security is a condition for progress on all fronts. Our priority must be to fulfil the conditions for *Afghanisation*, that is: Security for Afghans ... by Afghans.

Secondly, governance. Certainly the election process must be one that gives Afghans and us confidence. Beyond that, we must accelerate the build up of effective and transparent government, notably at provincial level. People must see their government as the trustworthy vehicle for progress.

Thirdly, social and economic progress. There are hopeful signs. But development is not sustainable or equally distributed yet. Poppy cultivation remains a serious threat. We must coordinate our assistance. So that it reaches all Afghans. Special Representative Kai Eide is mandated to lead and coordinate this effort. Let us fully commit ourselves to work with him!

Fourthly, we must intensify cooperation in the regional context. Afghanistan is not an island. And its challenges are interlinked with the region through ethnic, religious and political bonds. The core of this is the complex Afghan-Pakistani relationship. We must translate this insight into effective policies and agreements. I am convinced that this conference will contribute visibly to that goal.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The future of the Afghan people is at stake. The safety of people around the world is at stake. For the Afghan people a return to Taliban rule would lead to brutal rule, a paralyzed economy, and the denial of fundamental human rights - especially for women and girls.

As co-chair, I hope that today we will address the immediate challenges. Even more, I hope that our contributions will reflect a clear picture of our common goals. And mostly, I hope that we all share a firm, renewed and long-term commitment to Afghanistan. This will enable us to forge the new Afghan Bond – which we all need.

Thank you.