

**PRESS-CONFERENCE H.E. EIMERT VAN MIDDELKOOP, MINISTER OF DEFENCE, THE NETHERLANDS, NOORDWIJK, October 24, 2007**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon and a heartfelt welcome to this press conference at this informal meeting of NATO Defence Ministers. It is a great privilege to host the NATO community here in Noordwijk at Sea.

We deliberately chose this beautiful beach resort for our meeting. The fresh sea breeze helps to bring in some fresh ideas, discussing the challenges our Alliance is facing.

As we meet today, NATO is working on a better future for many people. Our men and women in uniform are keeping the peace, and defending our values, in operations from the Balkans to Afghanistan. Although informal, meetings like this one, gives us the opportunity to improve the success of our soldiers – now, and in the future.

Afghanistan is on top of our agenda today. It's development is something of which the entire international community can be proud – first of all the Afghans themselves. Democracy, reconstruction, development, human rights, security – in all these areas, there has been some steady progress.

Nevertheless, there are challenges. The situation in the South, where The Netherlands have around 1700 men and women on the ground, remains fragile and volatile. Although there are clearly signs of progress, there are still those who use violence to rob the Afghan people of their future, hamper girls to have education and return the country to the Middle Ages. We will simply not allow that to happen.

The Afghan government and the entire international community should speed up its efforts. One thing is for certain: there is no free ride to peace and security. It is not about what we are willing to say for a safer and more just world. It ultimately depends on what we are willing to do. Fair risk and burden sharing has to be the leading principle for NATO.

In the midst of these circumstances the Netherlands needs to make a decision on whether to continue our contribution in the province of Uruzgan. NATO, our allies and friends, the Netherlands, we are all working the room. This meeting is an important steppingstone to our decision. Hopefully, we will reach a conclusion next month.

But enough about the Netherlands. As I said, we are proud to host this meeting, to receive our allies, our non-NATO partners, the Afghan minister Wardak and representatives of the United Nations, the European Union and the World Bank. I am also very proud to host this meeting under the chairmanship of my fellow countryman Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. Jaap, the floor is yours.