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POLITICAL COMMITTEE

VISIT TO AFGHANISTAN

SECRETARIAT REPORT

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Seven members of the Defence and Security and Political Committees visited Afghanistan from 17-21 May. Led by Sven Mikser (Estonia), the group met with military commanders, Afghan officials and representatives of international organizations working to improve conditions in Afghanistan. The delegation also visited the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) at Feyzabad in Afghanistan's northeastern Badakshan province to view first hand the developments in that part of the country.

2. In general, the delegation found that while much has been accomplished, a tremendous amount remains to be done before Afghanistan can stand on its own. The elements of a democratic state are in place and becoming stronger, but the central government has limited control over large parts of the south and east of the country. Many development projects are progressing well but ensuring security is vital if self-sustaining economic development is to take root. Nonetheless, given the tribal structure and more than 30 years of civil war Afghanistan will remain one of the least developed countries in the world in the foreseeable future. The Afghan National Security Forces, in particular the Army, are making impressive progress, but corruption is prevalent in the police force, especially the highway police.

3. The delegation visit coincided with a critical time in the mission as NATO is taking control of overall operations in the south of Afghanistan. This move represents a new degree of synergy between ISAF and the US-led coalition forces currently operating in the region. It is a difficult area marked by Taliban violence and NATO forces will more than double the number of troops in the region. Military commanders were careful to underline that the mission is not a peacekeeping operation and that NATO forces will only be useful if they have the flexibility to be used for a wide range of missions.

4. Military and civilian officials alike emphasised the need to increase the commitment of resources to the mission. Military commanders consistently noted the lack of air transportation assets, which hinders their ability to assist the government of Afghanistan extend its legitimate authority into the more troubled parts of the country. Development officials noted the vast infrastructural projects needed to improve the overall situation in Afghanistan. In particular, irrigation, road construction and energy projects could both speed the economic development of Afghanistan and allow for greater entrenchment of the central government in remote areas.

5. The challenges that Afghanistan faces are many and intertwined. Development cannot take place without security, but there will be no lasting security without development. While there are many signs of improvement, more 'concentration of effort' among the civilian donors as well as between the civil and the military side is necessary. The success of the counter-narcotics programme heavily hinges on the ability to provide viable alternative livelihoods, but this is dependent on building roads and irrigation systems that make other crops a viable alternative. Yet, projects of this nature are virtually impossible without some level of security against those forces that seek to arrest Afghanistan's progress and drag it back to the medieval governance of the Taliban years.

II. MEETINGS WITH MILITARY COMMANDERS AND NATO OFFICIALS

6. The delegation met with **Minister Hikmet Cetin**, the NATO Senior Civilian Representative, the Commander of ISAF, **Lt. General David Richards**, and the Chief of Staff of ISAF, **Maj. General Chris Brown** as well as the deputy commander of British forces in Afghanistan **Col. Stewart Douglas**.

7. The military commanders emphasised the importance of Stage 3 in which NATO takes control of operations in the south of Afghanistan. With this step, NATO is taking on the most demanding operation in its history. Military commanders underlined that this is a combat operation and the larger number of troops in that troubled region would only be useful if they could be used robustly. Gen. Richards in particular was adamant about the need for flexible forces that can be used for a range of missions. The General and others informed the delegation that national caveats have further been eliminated, but that further improvements in this area are required.

8. Meetings with the military leadership also alleviated some of the confusion resulting from the distinction between counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism and the respective roles of ISAF and the US-led coalition. Counter-insurgency operations involve the use of a basket of tools and seek to deprive insurgents of safe havens from which they can cause instability in the region. Gen. Richards referred to the “ink spot” strategy of creating areas of stability and relative prosperity that would spread and eventually link together, thus depriving the insurgents of areas where they can operate with impunity. Counter-terrorist operations are more narrowly tailored operations to kill or capture particular high-value Al-Qaida terrorists operating in the region. ISAF will do the former task, which will involve combat operations. The latter task will be conducted by the US-led coalition, which is coming under the command of ISAF. The commanders who met with the delegation acknowledged that it is often a subtle distinction and that the soldier on the ground cannot be expected to distinguish between the two.

9. Gen. Richards also emphasised the need for a quick transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 when ISAF will take command of all operations in the country including eastern Afghanistan. This will insure that there will not be any artificial line between ISAF and the US-led coalition currently in control of operations in eastern Afghanistan.

10. Gen Richards in particular underlined the importance of setting developmental priorities and creating a seamless web between security and development efforts. Security and development efforts are currently not sufficiently synchronized but they must become so to ensure lasting success. He strongly suggested to provide more focus to the ongoing reconstruction: priority should be given to projects in the sectors of irrigation, roads and energy supply. Significant improvements in those areas would allow farmers to grow viable crops other than opium poppies and transport them to market. By focusing on irrigation and roads, the international community could make a stronger contribution to basic infrastructure that would improve the reach of the central government and make it possible to have a sustained counter-narcotics programme.

11. All military as well as civilian leaders also emphasised that their presence is only at the request of the government of Afghanistan. The overall mission is to support the government of Afghanistan in its efforts to create a stable environment that will allow the sort of development that has passed Afghanistan by for several decades. NATO forces will leave if and when the government of Afghanistan requests that foreign troops leave the country. But all the officials that the delegation met with expected that the mission will last for years to come.

III. MEETINGS WITH AFGHAN OFFICIALS AND OTHER CIVILIAN OFFICIALS

12. The delegation met with **President Hamid Karzai**, **Deputy Minister of the Interior Sediqi**, several western Ambassadors, and representatives of the UN and the EU. During a dinner the delegation also the opportunity to meet and discuss with several members of the parliament of Afghanistan including **Mrs Fawzia Koofi**, Deputy Speaker of the Wolesi Jirga (lower house) and the Afghan conciliator, **Professor Modjaddidi Sebhatollah**.

13. President Karzai expressed his deep appreciation for the continued support of the international community and NATO in particular. However, he warned against the misperception that Afghanistan would be a “done job”. He acknowledged, however, that there is still a long way

to go before Afghanistan can be considered stable. The most important factor to him was the continuation of the war on terror with a more strategic outlook. President Karzai was critical of the role of Pakistan and emphasised the need to tackle the problem on that side of the border where radical madrasses turn out large numbers of radicalized students eager to participate in jihad in Afghanistan. In addition to improving border control, Islamabad must also do more to tackle Taliban training camps on its side of the border. He urged western governments to take a stronger line with Pakistan. He acknowledged the steps that the government of Pakistan has already taken, but believed that more should be done to control the spread of radicalism from Pakistan.

14. UN and EU officials noted that the security situation in the country is quite complex and is not simply driven by Taliban insurgents. According to the most recent United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) analysis of violent conflict in Afghanistan, less than 20 percent of the violent incidents in the country could be attributed to insurgency. The bulk of the violence in the country is driven by tribal conflict, or personal disputes over land and other factors. The insurgency, however, does cause nearly 70 percent of the casualties given that it increasingly uses indiscriminant weapons such as improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers.

15. Western Ambassadors and military commanders alike noted that the insurgency is very limited in its reach and popular appeal, but the increased use of terror tactics such as improvised explosive devices increases the level of attention focused on it. The general assessment of the Taliban insurgency is that their active fighters have dwindled to number in the hundreds at any one time and they cannot take and hold territory.

IV. VISIT TO PRT AT FEYZABAD

16. In addition to the meetings in the capital Kabul, the delegation also visited the PRT in the Badakhshan province in the northeast of Afghanistan. The PRT is under German command but features troops from a number of countries including Denmark, the Czech Republic and Belgium. It is one of the larger PRTs with some 400 troops, but it covers an area the size of Denmark with a population of approximately 1 million. There are no paved roads in the entire province and much of the region is simply impassable with any vehicle. The PRT has no helicopters although air support can be called in from Termez or Kabul. As a result, the soldiers cannot patrol significant parts of the province, especially in the east and north. The difficult terrain also limits the possibility for effective border control. As the delegation learned, much of the drugs produced in Afghanistan are being transferred via this border.

17. The PRT is designed to support the government of Afghanistan in building its institutions in the region. The province is a particularly poor and remote part of the country, even by Afghan standards. Therefore, the PRT's mission is to secure the region, show a visible presence, and assist in development by making the area more stable and secure. As part of this mission the PRT also offers some support to the Disarmament of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) and the counter-narcotics programme.

18. Describing the security situation as "mainly calm, but unstable" the commander of the PRT outlined the tenuous position of Afghan government institutions in the area. The Governor is a reportedly capable administrator, but coming from a different ethnic group he does not have broad support among the other regional players. So called "local power brokers" remain important even after the dismantlement of the large militias. One in particular maintains a clan-based network with ties into drug production and smuggling that reaches into the local police and the highway police. The problem is that he was a key player in fighting off the Russian military and in preventing the Taliban from establishing a grip on the province. Thus, he has considerable popular support in the region and any rapid moves against him would likely backfire against the government institutions and the PRT.

19. Similar problems restrict the efficacy of the poppy elimination programme. Although the area is not a centre of poppy cultivation, poppy fields could be seen from the main road. The town was filled with posters and notices telling the population that the cultivation of poppy is illegal and that their poppy crops would be destroyed, but the tractors designated for the eradication programme were parked in the centre of town. PRT officials said that it would be unlikely that they would get the fuel to move out to the fields given the general hostility to the programme. It is expected that the poppy harvest in the region will increase this year. PRT officials emphasised that the poppy eradication programme will be stalled until there is substantial material support for the alternative livelihoods programme.

V. CONCLUSIONS

20. Afghanistan continues to make progress towards stability on a variety of levels. Although governing institutions remain weak, they have continuously improved over the last few years. The large militias have been disbanded and their leaders either co-opted or marginalized. The threat from the Taliban remains serious but it is by all accounts incapable of mounting a serious challenge to the central government. Corruption in the police force is endemic, but Afghan National Police units performed well in recent engagements with insurgents and the Afghan National Army shows signs of continual improvement.

21. The counter-narcotics effort stands out as one area where all efforts so far have not generated positive change. To some extent the problem may be intractable until it is possible to create viable alternative livelihoods for Afghan farmers. Until irrigation systems are repaired and roads are constructed to allow farmers to get crops to the market, opium will remain one of the few viable crops in many regions. It is also critical to address the demand side of the problem. Afghan farmers grow opium poppies to meet the demand for heroin in Europe. If demand fell, so would the financial incentive to produce opium.
