

Statement By

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At the

**International Conference on Afghanistan:
A Comprehensive Strategy in a Regional Context**

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Your Excellency Prime Minister Balkenende,
Your Excellency Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon,
Excellencies
Distinguished friends of Afghanistan,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am extremely honored to be attending this important conference that brings together the friends of Afghanistan; friends whose commitment and support has been our source of strength and hope for many years now.

Our collective struggle in Afghanistan has reached a critical juncture and I am grateful that, at an important time like this, we are meeting today to ensure that our joint struggle for security, freedom and democracy remains a priority and that Afghanistan and the region's place in this struggle remains a focus.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It was over seven years ago when the rule of Al Qaida and the Taliban regime was overthrown in Afghanistan and our people were liberated from war, oppression and interference. Over these years, we in Afghanistan have been at the forefront of the international effort to fight terrorism and extremism to remove its menacing specter from the lives of millions of people in the region and beyond.

As I look back at the past seven years of Afghanistan's partnership with the international community, I take pride in our collective accomplishments. A country that, seven years ago, was isolated, oppressed by a tyrannical regime and violated by international terrorists from far-flung corners of the world, is a full-fledged member of the international community and is taking steady steps towards democracy and the rule of law. Today we have a political process that ensures our people's democratic participation in determining their own destiny. Basic freedoms, including freedom of speech, media and political activity, have been insured at a historical scale.

We have welcomed home about five million Afghan refugees – which is one of the largest return movements in history. Afghanistan's income per capita has grown from a dismal US \$ 185 in 2002 to US \$ 450 today. Thousands of kilo meters of roads have been paved. Three quarters of Afghanistan's nearly 40,000 villages have benefited from our rural development projects. Today, we have over six and half million boys and girls attending schools, the highest level in our history. We have established hundreds of clinics and hospitals around the country, boosting our basic health coverage from 9% of the population seven years ago to over 85% today. About 38 percent of the 46500 students who entered universities this year were girls. Needless to remind you, ladies and gentlemen, that this would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

These historical achievements have come at a dear cost, the sacrifices of hundreds of your sons and daughters and thousands of ours; these achievements must not be undervalued.

The greatest tribute we owe to the precious lives that have been lost is to build on our achievements, add to our efforts and success in building a secure, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan.

Our gathering here today is yet again a recognition that completing our success in Afghanistan will depend on a strategy that is shared, comprehensive and workable, and on the extent to which we work in partnership to realize this strategy. In this context, I welcome the announcement last week of a new, comprehensive strategy of the United States of America for Afghanistan and Pakistan. I thank President Barack Obama and his distinguished team, notably Secretary Hilary Clinton, for injecting a fresh, strong and judicious leadership in the international effort to counter the threat of terrorism and stabilize Afghanistan and Pakistan. I am encouraged by the elements of the new strategy and pledge, on behalf of Afghanistan, our full commitment to continue working in partnership with the United States and the international community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the next five years, Afghanistan will need continued and expanded measures on four components of a comprehensive strategy: security, development, governance and reconciliation.

On the security front, while significant challenges still remain, the consensus that has gradually emerged about the regional dimension of the terrorist threat is a step in the right direction. However, this recognition must translate into effective policies and measures in our collective fight against terrorism. As well as fighting any terrorists present on the Afghan soil decisively, we must no longer tolerate any

sanctuaries, networks and support-bases. We must isolate, reform or remove those entities that may be using extremism to advance any geopolitical goals, and suffocate the arteries through which terrorism is sustained.

Also in this context, I welcome the growing recognition that, without true cooperation from Afghanistan's neighbors, victory over terrorism cannot be assured. The close partnership we have developed with the democratically elected government of Pakistan has become a valuable asset to the regional approach to fighting terrorism. The valuable role played by the Republic of Turkey, a mutual friend of Afghanistan and Pakistan, furthering confidence and cooperation between the two countries, must receive my special recognition at this meeting today.

Another urgent priority to ensure success in our common struggle was to revise the methodology of counter-terrorism operations with a view to avoiding the collateral damage suffered by civilian populations. I am pleased to report that, recently, we have agreed with our allies in NATO and the Coalition forces on a set of measures to prevent civilian casualties. I am confident that the implementation of these measures will result in greater protection for the civilian population. The Afghan people also expect that any military scale up will be used effectively to protect civilian lives and to stem the infiltration of terrorists from across Afghanistan's borders.

As a matter of strategic priority, we will move ever more aggressively towards Afghan-i-sation of the security sector through an urgent and decisive increase of the size and capability of the Afghan national army and the national police to assume responsibility in the fight against terrorism and to provide security and rule of law for our citizens. I am very encouraged by the greater openness from our

international partners towards a demand-led expansion of the Afghan security forces and prioritizing the training and equipping of these forces. Indeed, building up the Afghan security capacity will be the surest, most sustainable and least costly way to overcome the threat of terrorism, provide security and law and order to the people of Afghanistan. We therefore urge our partners to translate their goodwill into a concrete plan of investment for the development of the Afghan National Security Forces with an increased sense of urgency.

We also have the policy of reconciliation and dialogue in the centre of our strategy for achieving peace. We will spare no effort to bring back to Afghanistan, and to normal lives, all those from the ranks of the Taliban who have no association with Al Qaida and are willing to embrace peace and accept the Constitution. A policy of reconciliation, however, can only succeed if carried out under the aegis of the national institutions of Afghanistan.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We around this table know very well that sustainable development is the best assurance for our permanent victory over terrorism. Success will depend on the extent to which we can show to our people that they can aspire to better, more rewarding lives and that their children will not live the calamitous lives their parents have endured due to decades of conflict and interference.

While we continue to build on our achievements in the areas of health, education and building roads, agriculture and energy will be our top priorities which require urgent and adequate investment over the years to come. Agricultural development with a focus on water management, farm credit and access to land can easily and

rapidly make Afghanistan self-sufficient in food production. In this context, we welcome the increased attention duly paid to agricultural development in President Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan.

Effective coordination of our efforts at all levels is a crucial precondition for producing tangible results in these and other sectors of reconstruction and development. Building up Afghan institutions to deliver services and guarantee a long term social and economic development must also be at the heart of our concerns.

The significance of good governance cannot be overstated. It is hardly surprising that a country emerging from decades of devastation and war will face a rocky path in rebuilding its broken institutions and putting them to service of the populace. Having said that, the achievements we have had in building up institutions and improving governance at various levels over the past seven years have been remarkable. This progress is by no means enough. We must continue our efforts for years to come to reach a satisfactory level of governance across the country.

The fight against corruption lies at the heart of our focus on improving governance. Consistent with the Afghan government's commitment made in Paris last year, we have taken important steps to fight corruption. In the past one year, many people, including senior government officials of up to cabinet rank, have been dismissed, prosecuted or punished for corruption. The establishment of the High Office of Oversight & Anti-Corruption including special units in the Office of the Attorney General and in the Judiciary will provide us with the necessary institutional framework to translate our commitment into further tangible actions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let there be no doubt that we will not spare any effort towards building an effective, accountable, and transparent government that the Afghan people can trust and let there be no do doubt about our commitment and resolve to fight corruption of any nature. We know it well that it is going to be a daunting and long-term challenge to tackle a menace which is the product of thirty years of war, destruction of institutions and impoverishment. Fighting corruption in such an environment will require a comprehensive approach with a focus on law enforcement, improving laws and regulations, streamlining procedures, increased accountability mechanisms and public education. In this context, we welcome President Obama's call for an anti-corruption compact between the government of Afghanistan and the international community with time-bound benchmarks and well-defined mutual responsibilities.

In this regard, we must also address the widespread grievance among Afghan public concerning the wastage of reconstruction resources that are outside the government's sphere of influence. To make the Afghan government truly and meaningfully accountable, we call on donors to adopt measures towards aid effectiveness and avoid the use of parallel structures that undermine the development and legitimacy of national institutions.

Despite the agreements in principle in several international fora, notably London in January 2006 and Paris in June 2008, the issue of aid effectiveness has received mere lip service from many corners. Today, as we enter a new phase, a much stronger coordination of aid delivery, with a focus on building Afghan institutions and increasing efficiency, becomes absolutely necessary. I commend the role and

work of the United Nations and the Secretary General's special envoy, Mr Kai Eide, towards improving coordination, and encourage our partners to support this process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another major challenge that will not go away easily is the problem of poppy cultivation and drug trade. After seeing several successive years of up-spiral in poppy cultivation across the country, our counter narcotics efforts have paid off as we saw a 20 percent reduction in 2008, and anticipate a further 20 to 30 percent reduction this year. In 2005, only 3 out of Afghanistan's 34 provinces were poppy free. Today, as we speak, the number of provinces which are now free of poppy is 22. Last year, over 600 drug-lords and dealers were arrested and 35 percent of them have already been convicted. These achievements have not come about without a cost. Hundreds of Afghan policemen have sacrificed their lives in eradication of crops, interdiction and bringing criminals to justice. Today, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is mainly concentrated in those districts that are either partially or completely outside the control of the Afghan government. So our continued success in fighting poppy cultivation will depend on regaining control of these areas.

To win the war on drugs, we also call for a new compact between Afghanistan and its international partners with a revised division of labor.

My government is fully committed to implementing an Afghan-led and owned strategy of counter-narcotics with a much stronger emphasis on effective alternative livelihood development and robust law enforcement. We call on our

international partners to provide through the Afghan budget the necessary resources and to hold us accountable for achieving results.

Ladies and gentlemen,

2009 will be a critical year for Afghans as well as the international mission. The challenges we face in this year will test our resolves, and will shape the future in a significant way. Together, we will work hard to prepare for and hold the presidential and provincial assembly elections on 20 August. This election represents an important milestone in our journey towards consolidating democracy and stability in Afghanistan. Therefore it is crucial to ensure that free, fair, credible and secure elections are held across Afghanistan.

The Afghan government will depend on support from the United Nations, NATO and other partners from the international community to fulfill this responsibility. I have no doubt that the enemies of peace and stability will do whatever they can to disrupt the election process. We together must use all the resources and capabilities at our disposal to protect the elections and provide a safe environment for the Afghan people to vote. We also invite the United Nations, NATO, the OSCE, the European Union, OIC and other regional and international organizations to send monitors to observe the elections.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Seven years ago, we the Afghan people made certain commitments as part of our partnership with the international community. We promised that we Afghans would come together around a legitimate political process, and help build a new,

democratic Afghan state. We promised to guarantee to our people, especially our women, the rights and freedoms that had been denied to them for decades. We promised to send our children to school, despite vicious attacks by terrorists. We promised to demobilize our formerly armed groups and integrate them into legitimate national institutions. We promised to be an honest, steadfast partner to the international community in the fight against terrorism and to continue to make sacrifices in this fight. We promised to use whatever opportunities afforded to us to build up our public institutions.

Today, as I stand before you in this distinguished gathering, I take pride that we kept our promises, and delivered our commitments. Make no mistake: we have had important setbacks and shortcomings too – none due to broken promise or lack of effort – but, as far as we the Afghan people are concerned, the process moved forward despite obstacles, and it will do so with certainty.

Today, I renew that commitment once again, and call on our friends in the international community to support us as we continue to build Afghanistan into a stable and confident society that is free from violence, drugs and terror, and that is an asset for a peaceful region and the wider world.

To our neighbors in the region, I reiterate Afghan people's strong desire to live in peace, harmony and prosperity with them. The future we are trying to build in Afghanistan is one that we will share in peace with Pakistan, with Iran, with our neighbors to our north, and with China, India and Russia, and it is a future that we cannot build without the goodwill and support of these neighbors. We in Afghanistan will spare no effort at promoting peace, friendship, trade and

prosperity across the region and do hope that our regional partners will continue to reciprocate meaningfully.

To the brotherly nations in the Islamic world, I emphasize my country's proud place as a member of the Muslim Ummah. We cherish the ties of blood, history and faith that connect us, and are eager to build those ties in all dimensions. I am grateful to Saudi Arabia, particularly for the kind efforts of His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. We also thank the UAE for their generous contributions to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

To the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, we in Afghanistan are grateful for your generosity, and eternally indebted for the sacrifices of your young men and women, who served bravely for the cause of Afghanistan's security and the international war on terrorism. Afghanistan will never forget these sacrifices, and remains strongly committed to a long-term partnership with the Alliance.

Prime Minister Balkenende, your soldiers have served in one of the most volatile regions of Afghanistan, and they have served honourably. I am grateful for their services and their sacrifices.

To the United States, I strongly reiterate our commitment to the strategic partnership between our countries. We are all encouraged by the renewed determination of the United States, under President Barack Obama, and hope that the US will once again lead the effort to respond to the challenges we continue to face. I am also confident that President Obama's leadership will be met by a rejuvenated response from our other allies in Europe and elsewhere.

And finally, to all our partners from around the world, EU, Japan, India, Canada, Australia and many other countries represented around this table today, who have supported us through our arduous journey over the past seven years, I say thank you, and I say we depend on your continued friendship.

Prime Minister Balkenende, thank you for hosting this conference and the hospitality we received today. May I also thank Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon and Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton for the idea of this conference and help making it a reality.

This year, ladies and gentlemen, Afghanistan's partnership with the international community that started in 2001 will be entering its eighth year and there is much by way of our collective achievements that we can be proud of. The new year is going to be tough and full of challenges, but already it looks brimming with opportunities too. We in Afghanistan are determined to grasp every opportunity with eagerness and vision, and meet each challenge with courage and resolve. And we will count on continued partnership with the friends around this table.

Thank you.