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**ADDRESS TO INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN**  
**The Hague, 31 March 2009**

Prime Minister Balkenende,  
President Karzai,  
Distinguished Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to the Government of the Netherlands for their efforts in convening this important Conference on Afghanistan. And I particularly thank Prime Minister Balkenende who was with us here a moment ago for his leadership and initiative

We are all aware of the great commitment of the Netherlands to Afghanistan and the sacrifices it has made in that effort.

I also thank the other leaders and delegations that are here today to show their commitment to building a strong partnership between Afghanistan, and its neighbours, including, among others, Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian states, as well as the broader international community.

Too often in Afghanistan's history, the country has been the battlefield of rival powers.

Today it is an arena where the Afghan people are striving mightily for peace and development, and where the international community is united in its commitment to them.

We cannot afford to fail in this endeavour. Failure would be a betrayal of the Afghan people. It would be a betrayal of the progress that has been achieved.

And it would betray our stated commitment to uphold the ideals of peace, human rights and development for all.

This is a critical year for Afghanistan. We have said this before. But this year is different.

There is real potential to make concrete progress in important areas, from fighting illicit opium production to increasing productivity in traditional agricultural commodities, from combating organized criminal groups to advancing regional economic cooperation.

We should bring the same sense of urgency to addressing these challenges as we are bringing to efforts to improve the security situation.

I welcome efforts toward an international engagement that is not only re-energized, but also brings together civilian and military efforts in a more comprehensive way.

Four days ago, I attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Conference on Afghanistan in Moscow that focused on some of the main regional challenges facing Afghanistan and its neighbours, including terrorism, the illegal drug trade and organized crime.

I came away from those broad-based discussions encouraged by the shared understanding that these ills can be addressed only through heightened regional and global effort. I commend the initiative of the Russian Government, and I believe Foreign Minister Lavrov of Russia will make a briefing on the Moscow conference.

Last year, in Paris, the international community met to pledge financial resources to Afghanistan's National Development Strategy.

We committed ourselves to clear priorities and well defined principles of aid effectiveness, including transparency of assistance.

Today we meet for a different purpose: to show our political support; to build on the Paris conference; to commit with renewed vigour to Afghanistan's stability and recovery.

In August this year, Afghanistan will hold elections for the Presidency.

We know from experience that the second cycle of post-conflict elections can be even more difficult than the first.

Too often, flawed elections have led to greater instability. This cannot be allowed to happen in Afghanistan.

Too much effort has been invested; too much progress has been made.

The challenges to holding credible elections are significant. It is important that Afghan leaders ensure a functioning and effective Government until the start of the next presidential term.

The Afghan Government, the Afghan political leaders and Afghan electoral institutions, with the support of the international community, all share the responsibility to ensure that the electoral process is fair, credible and transparent.

This meeting must also reaffirm our mutual obligations under the Afghanistan Compact and National Development Strategy.

That means, above all, honouring our previous commitments.

We need to review the benchmarks and refocus them on the priorities agreed at the Paris Conference.

As we do so, we need to be realistic about the prevailing conditions on the ground, and the timeliness within which progress will be achieved.

We have reached a point where we can share a common diagnosis of what has *not* worked in Afghanistan.

We also have strong examples of what *has* worked, especially in the health and education sectors, the reform and strengthening of the Afghan National Army and the decrease of poppy cultivation.

Media reports, however, depict a situation in Afghanistan that is bleaker than the reality. This has led to pessimistic statements by policy-makers.

We must avoid an attitude that focuses mainly on setbacks of the past, and learn to recognize the positive signs of progress.

These should breed self-confidence for the future.

We must seize the opportunities for progress that are before us.

A deployment of additional international troops, with the primary goal of improving security for the Afghan people, will help to secure the electoral environment.

More troops will also mean more trainers for the national security forces, and an increase in their size and capabilities.

I commend U.S. President Obama's new strategy which emphasises increased military commitment, strengthened institution building and enhanced cooperation with the authorities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in the wider region, in handling Afghanistan's political and security needs.

This represents a qualitative change in policy that deserves widespread support.

Improved security and decreased violence will provide a substantial foundation for greater civil society involvement in the political process.

It will also help us expand our assistance efforts for the reconstruction of the country.

Just over a week ago, the United Nations Security Council renewed *unanimously* the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

It reaffirmed the central role within the international community of the United Nations and of my Special Representative in stabilizing Afghanistan through the coordination of international efforts and assistance in Afghanistan.

We take this responsibility very seriously.

Afghanistan needs our support across the board.

Over the past several years UNAMA has worked sedulously in the interests of Afghanistan.

I am grateful for the strong support shown by the international community to UNAMA.

My special envoy, Kai Eide, will continue to work with the Afghan Government and its international partners to help the country strengthen its institutions, improve governance, establish the rule of law, and combat corruption.

We will continue to work to improve food security. Only half of Afghanistan's arable land is being farmed today.

And we will continue to work to protect human rights, especially for women and girls.

Women should be free to work, teach and live without oppression and fear.

And children – especially girls – must be given the education that will help them build a better future for Afghanistan.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ministers,

The Afghan people have been through just about every challenge we can imagine. Chronic poverty. Natural disaster. Political repression and upheaval. Foreign occupation. Civil strife.

Through all this and more, they have shown remarkable resilience.

In recent years, Afghans have moved decisively along a new path, toward a new vision for their future.

Our responsibility is to help them secure that vision.

Thank you very much. Thank you for your commitment and leadership.