

“The challenges of stabilization in Afghanistan - a look forward”, Helsinki, 29.2.2008

Your excellency,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we heard from the most honourable foreign minister Spanta, there is no denying: there are significant challenges in stabilizing Afghanistan and bringing it back to the path of reconstruction and development, starting from getting the justice system work to the respect of human rights and pacifying a vicious Taliban insurgency. Indeed, on the stabilization front the omens for next summer are not encouraging; alone this month the Taliban forces have conducted two devastating terrorist attacks in Kandahar and Helmand, killing almost two hundred civilians. Their terror campaign has continued with the assassinations of governmental officials in and religious authorities.

Since 2006 there has been an uneasy feeling in western capitals that the stabilization and reconstruction project is somehow derailed or misguided. Here in Finland one parliamentarian even stated that Finland should disengage from Afghanistan, since, I quote: “the afghans don’t want us to be there”.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have had the rare opportunity to live and work in Afghanistan on several occasions: first as a visiting freelance journalist a few months after the fall of the Taliban regime, as a Finnish peacekeeper, then as a political representative for ISAF in Faryab province, later as a researcher on a fact-finding mission and now as a historian. This has given me a possibility to watch the progress made since 2001 and to see the challenges Afghanistan faces from different angle’s.

Let me briefly touch on the main challenges facing the afghan and western stabilization effort:

1. an intensifying insurgency,
2. slow development

3. a socio-religious battle for the identity of Afghanistan.
4. Veining international resolve.

On the security front, there has been an increase in suicide- and roadside bombings in the past two years. These have killed foremost afghans, not foreign peacekeepers. The increase of the number and quality of these asymmetric attacks should not perplex us; the fact is that this shift in tactics has been a reaction to the success of international and afghan military forces in taking the initiative. In a sense the security situation in Afghanistan has increased, since the talibs and their midlevel leadership have suffered heavy casualties in the last two years. Just yesterday, a significant talib organizer in Helmand province, Mullah Naqibullah was eliminated. However, the feeling of insecurity has grown especially in the West. This is partly the result of more efficient Taliban propaganda. Inside Afghanistan, the Taliban violence has been directed against those who represent a “perceived enemy” - police officers, tribal leaders and moderate religious authorities or persons who violate the strict deobandi sharia -interpretation of the Taliban.

However, the security situation is often assessed subjectively, narrowly and at times intentionally. The average afghan is more concerned about poverty, unemployment, how to feed their family, how to pay dowries and wedding costs than about security.

For the west the current question in the military front is where to find enough boots to the ground to do just that. Quite rightly the former interior minister of Afghanistan, the most honourable Ali Jalali has grudgingly pointed out, that Afghanistan is the least funded post-conflict project since World War two. In Kosovo, there were 20.5 soldiers per 1000 kosovars, in Bosnia, 19 soldiers per 1000 bosniaks, and even in Sierra Leone, 10 soldiers per 1000 sierraleonians. But then in contrast, there are merely 1,5 soldiers per 1000 afghans.

In the face of this, the western military forces has had to rely on close air support to win the military engagements with the armed enemies of Afghanistan. This, tragically, has at times resulted in civilian casualties, and as I should be pointed out, not seldom due to the fact that talibs have intentionally used civilians as human shields. Besides its tactical implications, the lack of enough boots on the ground has had an

humanitarian side as well: A week ago or so, I talked to a friend who is now serving as a Finish peacekeeper in the province of Samangan. He told me, that they had visited villages, where the village elders had told them that they were the first foreign visitors in four years. This should illustrate the importance of finding enough troops to have at least the “light military footprint” originally planed for ISAF.

On the military side it will take a long time before the west will be able to step back and give the afghans the lead in securing their country. Looking forward, the military engagement in Afghanistan has to be more integrated in a political process, that aims to split the armed opposition and neutralize its hard core, jihadist elements. The insurgency is motivated by many different, mainly local issues and conducted by a spectrum of actors. The majority of insurgents come from tribes that feel sidelined from the political process. With these a dialogue is needed. Indeed the case of Musa Qala in Helmand is a positive example. The path of negotiations will not be an easy one and will involve setbacks and breakdowns, but in the end, its should be possible gradually to marginalize the armed opposition. What will remain, are those elements who are fighting an ideological, internationalist insurgency against the west as a part of a world wide struggle between the Moslem and the Christian civilisation. In this conflict that side will prevail that has the support of the population and the determination to fight it through. Al-Qa’ida is not interested in Afghanistan as such and if it encounters stiff resistance, it will slowly shift its focus to other conflicts.

Besides the military issues, there is of course the overlapping dimension of reconstruction end development. There is wide reckoning that success in Afghanistan is not going to be achieved by only military victories: there will be no security without development, but also no development without security. I would argue that the main challenges in Afghanistan are not military in nature, but rather administrable and developmental.

The development challenges remain significant, but not impossible. However, on the development front I have, with some dismay, noticed an disappointment in some western capitals in the slow pace of reconstruction and development in Afghanistan. I think the main reason for this disappointment leys in our very western way of thinking that money alone

solves problems. A society that has undergone three decades of relentless conflict is not rebuilt in six years, regardless how much money is poured inside its borders. We should keep in mind that in contrast to many other post-conflict societies, the starting situation for rebuilding in Afghanistan has not been post-conflict, but rather post-destruction. So, we should not compare Afghanistan to other countries but to the starting point.

Considering the starting point, Afghanistan has actually made significant progress, for example in road building, education, development of the private sector or access to healthcare. The progress in these sectors that we here take granted, are unfortunately not dramatic enough for the media to report.

Besides the well known internal development problems, which have been listed many times by others, I would like to touch on some of the external challenges. The main biggest problem is the poor understanding of the donor countries of the Afghan culture and the situation on the ground. The second problem is an conflict between western expectations and Afghan realities. The third issue is a structural problem in the coordination between donor countries and finally the strict separation between security and development. How much security and stability is needed before civilian support elements can start their important work? Since it is impossible to create an totally secure environment, where attacks on NGO's and "soft targets" are not going to happen, we have to understand and unfortunately accept that there will be unavoidable risks and tragedies. I strongly believe these risks are worth taking. In the end, what most visibly sets us apart from the Taliban, is our will to develop and ease the life of the normal afghans.

The answers to the abovementioned challenges are in principle easy, more time, money and patience, but need political will and readiness for changes from all the international actors involved in Afghanistan. For the time being, we should lower our expectations. The main goal should remain a self-sufficient stability and a government that can increasingly take more charge of running and expanding its grip inside the country. Too often we see the reconstruction effort as a western project. What I would like to see is more afghan ownership. Afghan leaders should sit behind the steering wheel, not on the backseat with the international community trying no navigate the pitfalls of nation building in Afghanistan. We have to start to

trust our afghan friends. With that trust comes of course responsibilities. The West should keep the Afghan government focused on the commonly agreed goals, set out in the Afghan Compact. This demands leadership from the Afghan government to address also problematic issues, like corruption. This includes the actions and willingness to make needed changes for example in the provincial administration.

A unified strategy and an co-ordinating body that firstly can harmonize the security and development dimensions, but additionally can co-ordinate the efforts of the Afghan government and different countries who have come to Afghanistan with different levels of commitments and resources. It was a pity that the appointment of Paddy Ashdown as UN special envoy did not materialize. However, I again believe afghans should sit behind the steering wheel. I know, and my afghan friends know, that there is a need to co-ordinate our different efforts. So, I'm quite optimistic that sooner than later, the UN will find an special representative acceptable also to the Afghan government. However, I would like to stress again, that money in it self does not resolve problems alone. Donor nations have to learn to be genuinely interested in Afghanistan as it is, without stereotypes and wishful thinking. If the development of Afghanistan is our common goal, you don't go to Afghanistan just to teach, but also to learn.

What is needed are more "human engineers" on the ground; anthropologists, rural sociologists and agricultural economists. And again, not behind the steering wheel, afghans are surely better specialists on their country than we are, but as a support element that can help and strengthen the efforts of the Afghan government. For every 10 foreign soldier there should be an civilian specialist. These should partly be integrated into the Provincial reconstruction team -concept, which sees an integration of civilian and military efforts. Good experiences have been gained also from the Human Terrain Teams, which are teams of anthropologists and other social scientists integrated to American combat units in Afghanistan. These teams give the military the ability to understand subtle points of tribal relations and improve the performance of local governmental officials and persuade tribesmen to join the government. What I would like to would be more specialists integrated directly into Afghan ministries. Many of the economic and political problems fuelling

instability can be solved only by large numbers of Afghan and western civilian experts.

Besides the military and reconstruction dimensions, the Afghan conflict has a third, from the western eye mostly hidden dimension, namely a battle for the socio-religious identity of the Afghan society. Already during its regime and now with a new vengeance, the Taliban have started a concentrated assassination campaign against tribal elders and moderate religious authorities. Both of these groups have in the past resisted and challenged the earthly and religious authority of the Taliban. With this terror campaign the Taliban aims to silence those who could challenge their legitimacy and religious credentials. This battle for the right to define what is right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, is of profound importance. Afghans have to fight this by themselves, for themselves. However, the West should support and facilitate those forums that address these themes. As a good example serves the Kabul declaration from last year: over a hundred religious authorities condemned the use of suicide attacks as un-Islamic. This forum was organized by the German Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

A crucial front is the battle for hearts and minds here in the West. What Afghanistan needs is a long time commitment. Without informing the civil population, the average Finn will not understand what is at stake in Afghanistan, and will ask why we should send soldiers to Samangan or Balkh, or Helmand. This in turn will give opportunistic politicians an opportunity for harvest cheap political gain by demanding the withdrawal of "our boys" back home. This is easy, because those who will suffer are going to be far away in Afghanistan. As I pointed out, Finland is not an exemption, the rare discussions over Afghanistan have been mainly ill informed and superficial. Although I thank foreign minister Spanta for his kind words regarding Finland's efforts in Afghanistan, personally I think we could and should do more - increase modestly our troop level and first and foremost send more civilian specialists to aid the Afghan government.

Afghanistan has a special role in the conflict between Islam and radical Islamism inside the Moslem world. This conflict is truly global, and it is fought also in the mosques of Europe's capitals. A week ago, a Finnish radical convert to Islamism claimed in the Finnish state television that

“Afghanistan was a better place under the Taliban regime than today under president Karzai”. Trough out the Moslem world the eyes are on Afghanistan; which consequences are there if you trust the West, and is it going to abandon its friend when the going gets rough.

Here in Finland, we traditionally value the virtue of sisu, which requires patience and resolve to fight on against all odds. That has brought Finland, two hundred years ago quite a poor and war-ravaged country, amazing success in Europe today. I believe, that Afghans too can achieve a lot, if they just work hard and put their trust in God, as did Paavo of Saarijärvi, a hero in our national epic. All of the West should respect your sincere efforts and allow time to tell, who the whole story evolves. We also share common experience in building a national identity beyond linguistic and religious borderlines. Both of our countries have two official languages, and still we need to learn English for global use. Finland has a province with a very broad autonomy, and Afghanistan too may need to develop strong regional and local self-reliance instead of concentrating all trust on the central government. All such things need time and determination.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the end, the truth is, we can't afford an Afghanistan as it was before 2001. Not only for our sake, but most of all for the sake of the afghan civilians, which in themselves, should be a reason enough for use to do everything possible we can to build a better Afghanistan for tomorrow.

Thank you for your attention.