Speech by High Representative Catherine Ashton in the European Parliament on a new strategy for Afghanistan, 12 June 2012, Strasbourg

Our overall strategy in Afghanistan remains to assist the Afghan government and people to be able to run their own country. Ten years after 2001, we have embarked on what the Bonn conference last December called a "transformational decade" sustaining our engagement but changing its nature, putting Afghans more and more in control.

There has been clear progress - more than half the country and more than half the people are already under Afghan security control. But equally, the insurgency remains a major threat to security across the country. I want to extend my condolences to the families of the four French soldiers that were killed on Saturday.

Many challenges lie ahead. Afghanistan needs above all better governance. Without functioning politics and institutions that are seen as legitimate and effective, the transition cannot succeed. But also better action against drugs; better management of public finances; better rule of law; better human rights protection. Continued.

As the transition advances, it is right that we look to the Government of Afghanistan to set out its own long-term strategy for the country. We are working with the Government of Afghanistan, Member States and others in the international community to put in place a strategic framework and an agreed set of priorities.
We as EU will play our part. Provided the Government of Afghanistan meets its obligations, the EU and the Member States have committed to enhancing their assistance to Afghanistan in the next ten year period. The EU has begun negotiations with the Afghan Government on a new framework – the Cooperation Agreement for Partnership and Development (CAPD) – which will provide a legal basis for cooperation in all civilian fields and assistance to Afghanistan. We expect that assistance from the EU budget will focus on those areas where the EU can add most value: health, agriculture, governance and civilian policing.

It is crucial that we have confidence that our assistance is used for the purpose for which it was intended – to improve the lives of ordinary Afghans. That is why we have laid so much emphasis on the transparency of public finances. The Arlacchi report is right to insist that we must "ensure transparency and accountability in relation to the assistance provided to the Afghan Government, international organizations and NGOs".

I have read the allegations of mismanagement of the Law and Order Trust Fund by UNDP with grave concern. I welcome the full investigation that has been announced by UNDP. We await the conclusions of that investigation, and will take decisive action as appropriate.

We are in the midst of three key international conferences that will determine the relationship between the international community and the Afghan Government. Last month, the NATO summit in Chicago set out plans to sustain and develop the Afghan National Security Forces. In Chicago, both President Barroso and I highlighted the importance that the EU attaches to civilian policing. We announced that the EU will increase its funding for civilian police by 20% from the EU budget over the period 2011-2013. And also that the EU plans to make an enhanced contribution post-2014. With both the Afghan Government and international colleagues, I emphasised the critical role that a uniformed police – distinct from the military – needs to play in any democratic society so that people can have confidence in the fair administration of justice, in rule of law.

The EUPOL mission provides important support to this role – training police and improving the links between the police and the justice sector. Cooperation with the NATO training mission is now working well and, as suggested in your report, we continue to aim for a more complementary division of tasks at strategic and operational levels. We are currently undertaking a strategic review of EUPOL and plan to reach conclusions in the summer.

Counter narcotics will remain an important element of our engagement. The problem of drugs cannot be tackled by crop substitution alone, but needs to be addressed in all our programmes.

On 14 June, an important conference in Kabul will focus on increased regional cooperation – advancing the 'Heart of Asia' initiative begun in Istanbul last year. The Kabul meeting should highlight the important role countries in the region have to play in supporting conflict resolution, better security and development in Afghanistan. The European Union has much experience on how to advance regional cooperation and we stand ready to offer that expertise and support to Afghanistan's neighbours.
Indeed I have just returned from Pakistan where I raised these issues with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and other leaders. I stressed that while we would continue our engagement, Afghanistan's transition could not succeed without a constructive stance by its neighbours and that we recognised Pakistan's crucial role in this respect.

Then in Tokyo next month (8 July), there will be the opportunity for the Afghan Government to set out its development strategy for the country. In Tokyo, we as EU shall make it clear that our commitments require a corresponding commitment from the Government of Afghanistan to make progress on the issues which matter to us: electoral reform; public financial management; justice; and human rights. Above all, we will emphasise that the focus must now be on delivering results. That means the political will to drive through difficult reforms. But it also means having the necessary security in place to allow development to take place, especially outside Kabul.

In line with the recommendations of your report, the EU will press for better coordination of donor support and a better alignment between the Afghan Government and donors on priorities. We will consider joint programming of EU and Member States' assistance as circumstances allow.

The EU and Member States are making a real contribution to Afghanistan. The Afghan Government is doing a lot, but it needs to do more to fulfill its key commitments: to hold credible and transparent elections; to improve the management of public finances; to advance human rights, especially the rights of women and children.

Mr President,

I wish to end with a word on Afghanistan's women for I believe their role is crucial. I have met with representatives of Afghan women on several occasions – and did so last in the margins of the Bonn Conference in December. Their stories and leadership are remarkable. Afghan women leaders and civil society activists are very concerned that the gains and achievements women have made in the last decade are fragile. This will be a critical issue in any peace talks, but equally we must continue to focus on Afghanistan's governance and, in particular, the country's justice institutions: they are the key to ensuring that Afghanistan can comply with the commitments made in London, Kabul and Bonn. This is one area where the EU can and must play a strong role.

I believe that in many respects the Afghan women hold the key to the future of their country – and we need to do our utmost to support them as the transition unfolds.