Speech by the Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Christos Stylianides on behalf of the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary session on Afghanistan

Check against delivery!

Mr President, Honourable Members,

Afghanistan and its people are a priority for the European Union. We care about peace in the country, and the possibility of a national renaissance. The Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, which we hosted about a year ago, was a turning point in our cooperation. We Europeans have stepped up our engagement with Afghanistan – both financially and through a new diplomatic push with regional and international players.

Now, one year later, we can see progress in a number of areas. Key achievements include the National Strategy for Combating Corruption; the successful work of the Citizens’ Charter; Women’s Economic Empowerment National Priority Plan; and managing migration in the country. Progress has also been made on budget and fiscal reform, and the government has taken several measures to create a more competitive, export-oriented, and job-creating economy. But the work is not finished.

The security situation remains fragile. There have been a number of attacks in Kabul and other areas against security forces and places of worship affecting also innocent civilians, including women and children. We are alarmed by the high level of violence and the number of civilian casualties. Reconciliation and sustainable peace are the absolute priority for Afghanistan.
But a peace process can only be successful if it is led and owned by the Afghans themselves. The Afghan government can count on the EU to be a partner in their search for peace. We will not stop working to create the right environment towards a negotiated settlement, including through the work of the recently-appointed EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan.

We want to support the country in the areas where it needs it the most. And precisely to discuss these priorities, last February we have signed a Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development with the Afghan government. The Cooperation Agreement is a political commitment to set up a constant dialogue on all issues we care about, from the economy to migration, from women empowerment to human rights.

First, we are with the government as it tries to bolster the country’s fragile economy. This includes support to the rural economy, but also to the fight against drugs as well as illegal mining. Helping to strengthen Afghanistan’s regional connectivity will also be important.

Second, there can be no sustainable development when human rights and fundamental freedoms are not respected. Whilst some progress has been achieved in this field, a lot still needs to be done to improve women’s and children’s rights, to abolish the death penalty, to prevent torture and ill-treatment, to guarantee access to justice and the freedom of expression and to support human rights defenders.

The development of Afghanistan also requires women and girls to be able to contribute at full to the country’s social, economic and political life, as well as to the future peace process. So we are working to empower women in Afghanistan – helping girls go to school, training policewomen, and supporting innovative projects by female entrepreneurs.

Third, we have started a comprehensive dialogue with Afghanistan on migration. Let us be clear on this: managing human mobility is an interest we share with the Afghan people. We both want the Afghan youth to find better opportunities at home. We both want to prevent that the people of Afghanistan risk their lives in dangerous journeys across the world. We both want that those who return home can have the opportunity to a better life.

To this end, we have already mobilised almost €200 million Euros to ensure the returnees’ reintegration into society. And we will continue to work in the framework of the Joint Way Forward: a common political engagement for managing migration in a sustainable way, based on solidarity and dialogue.

Finally, we are working to strengthen democracy in the country, the rule of law and promoting good governance. Part of this work is the fight against corruption. The Afghan government has stepped up its anti-corruption measures and adopted in October a national anti-corruption strategy. Implementation of this strategy is now what truly matters.

We also, as the European Union, continue to support the civilian aspects of the security sector reform: a new police advisory project will be launched soon.

In 2018, Afghanistan is expected to hold parliamentary and district elections, followed by presidential elections in 2019. These elections need to be transparent, credible and inclusive, including for women. The Afghan authorities still need to implement a thorough electoral reform to ensure the trust of the electoral stakeholders in the process. We have already committed around €19 million to support and accompany a democratic electoral process.

The Afghan people deserve democracy and human rights, they deserve peace and prosperity. The European Union will continue to work with our partners in the Afghan government to achieve this. It is
not easy. At the same time, we will further develop our engagement with our international partners, to make Afghanistan and our common region more peaceful and more prosperous.

Our commitment to Afghanistan and its people is here to stay.

Thank you.

Link to the video:

**Closing remarks**

Thank you Mr President.

Dear colleagues, I believe this has been a very useful exchange and I thank you so much for your interventions and your contributions in this debate.

From this debate I conclude that we all share a common interest in using EU diplomatic power and EU financial instruments to their full potential in support of a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan.

In 2016 the Afghan Government made strong commitments towards self-reliance, responsibility and ownership of its political course and development policy. The European Union, as part of the wider international community, remains firmly committed to supporting the Government and the people of Afghanistan in this endeavour. The Government of Afghanistan’s continued engagement and appropriation of its commitments will be essential for this to be successful.

Our European support to Afghan refugees has been demonstrated in many areas and in many aspects. I personally visited Iran twice to show the tangible European solidarity on the ground in various areas there in Iran. In particular, I witnessed in a very demanding field, education in emergencies, our tangible solidarity there. So I strongly believe that, as the European Union, we are fully committed in order to provide any assistance to the Afghan people, not only inside Afghanistan but also outside Afghanistan.

A few words about irregular migration. Irregular migration to Europe is a reality and it needs to be addressed. Together with the country of origin, we do address it from a comprehensive angle in the spirit of the partnership framework, looking at the wider context at the causes of migration: poverty, conflict, insecurity. We are trying to remedy those causes with our instruments, political and diplomatic, security, and development cooperation. In our discussions and actions we pay particular attention to the sustainable reintegration of returned persons, not only from Europe, but also from the region, from where the biggest numbers of returns take place. It is about creating opportunities in the country of origin so that young Afghans find reasons to build their lives there, and not choose the dangerous irregular migration route and become victims of human traffickers.

Finally, let me thank you and the European Parliament for your continued support of all efforts leading towards lasting peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan.

Link to the video:
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