

THE DELEGATION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO THE UNITED STATES

PRESS CONFERENCE

**WITH
FRANCESC VENDRELL,
SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
FOR AFGHANISTAN**

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KASPER ZEUTHEN: My name is Kasper Zeuthen. I am with the Delegation here. I would like to welcome you all to today's press briefing with Mr. Vendrell. I would just kindly ask that before you ask any questions just identify yourself by name and affiliation, but we are a fairly small group so we can keep it fairly intimate and just ask away. If you have some opening remarks you would like to give before we get started --

FRANCESC VENDRELL: Well, thank you very much for coming here. I am, as the title indicates, a special representative of the European Union for Afghanistan as opposed to in Afghanistan, which means that part of my work is to ensure that the issue of Afghanistan is understood properly in EU member states, and therefore I spend a considerable amount of time when I'm not in Kabul traveling in European countries to discuss Afghanistan with my colleagues in the EU member states. And I occasionally also go outside the EU geographical area, and I had not been in Washington for two years, so I thought the time had come to come here and have some discussions with the U.S. authorities. So I have met senior officials in the State Department, in the National Security Council and in the Pentagon as well as in the Senate and in the – with staffers in the House of Representatives.

In terms of the administration, we have found – I have found a great convergence of views. I think that we can virtually say that we are able to sing from the same hymn page, and I'm very satisfied with the contacts I have had here.

I am leaving tonight for New York because I have further talks with the U.N. And on Monday I will be in Berlin -- Monday and Tuesday for talks with the German - - the new German government.

That is it. Sorry. That is it.

MR. ZEUTHEN: Any questions?

Q: George Jemma (ph) of AP. The Taliban, according to what one reads here, seems to me regrouping, seems to be stronger than they were, say, a year or two ago. Is that your assessment?

MR. VENDRELL: The Taliban is definitely stronger, or appears to be stronger in the South than has been the case for over the past three years, and we have to ask ourselves why and also what does it mean. I think that there were several errors committed, mistakes committed in the period following the Bonn Conference in 2001. One was the view that the commanders and warlords that had replaced the Taliban in two-thirds of the country were a force for good, when in fact there was – we should have realized that these very same commanders had facilitated the arrival of the Taliban to power in the 1990s because of the mismanagement of the country.

So I think it took some time for the international presence to realize that these people were not necessarily allies, and that in turn meant that not enough effort was placed in the disarmament of these groups, in the disbandment of these illegal groups which have now become illegal in the last – and a view was held, perhaps existed that in Afghanistan all one had to do was to ensure that there would be elections and that – and fighting al Qaeda and Taliban by military means.

I think that now there is a broader realization that the Taliban has been able to strengthen itself; not to a very large degree, but still to be able to play a bigger and more important role, partly because they have some -- are able to use neighboring territory to carry out this – to carry out infiltration into Afghanistan, but also because there are some certain problems in the Southern provinces of Afghanistan and indeed elsewhere, too -- but particularly in the Southern provinces - - that need to be resolved if we want to successfully fight the Taliban. And these include improving the governance of these provinces, having effective and people of

integrity as governors and chiefs of police. It requires to carry out reconstruction in these difficult provinces so that people see the benefit of peace. We need to ensure that – we need to make progress on the issue of narcotics because there are – not only does the Taliban profit from the growth of narcotics but also some of their links between the narco-traffickers and provincial officials in the country. And so in order to successfully defeat the Taliban, you need a combination of a military approach and a political approach.

The military approach – it has been followed. It will continue to be followed and indeed strengthened with the arrival of about 7,000 NATO forces in the southern provinces. Two thousand already in Canadian forces are now in Kandahar. Three thousand British forces are being deployed in Helmand Province. And a combined 1,450 Dutch forces will be deployed in Oruzgan to which 250 Australian soldiers will be added.

So we are going to have in these key provinces a force that we didn't have before. And this is a force that will have both a military component but also a component of ensuring that there is better governance, more reconstruction, and that some of the problems that have afflicted the provinces in the South are taken care of.

Q: Can I just follow up on this, sir? My name is Paramis Borabnam (ph), a reporter with the Agence France Press.

There was a report today by the Institute of International Studies in London – (inaudible) – Arabic Studies in London that the Taliban is expected to take advantage of what they perceive to be an opportunity during the switchover from U.S. to NATO deployment. And they (elected to continue to increase?) the operation of – (inaudible). And there could be heavy casualties among the European NATO member contributors.

MS. VENDRELL: I think that the report is correct in assessing that there is the widespread feeling -- I think the mistaken feeling, though -- there is the feeling that we Europeans are going to be a softer touch than the Americans, and that therefore if the Taliban targeted our military presence in the South, that we will more easily withdraw. I think, as I pointed out a bit earlier, this is a misunderstanding and a miscalculation on the part of the Taliban. We are going to stay put.

I think British forces and the combined – first of all because we will be a much larger force than the coalition forces were in those particular areas, and two, because we do not intend to withdraw until we finish the job. And if you look at the statement by General David Richards, the new commander of ISAF, when he took over command at the beginning of this month, he made it absolutely clear that we were there to do a job and the job had first to be completed before we could think of withdrawing.

But, yes, it may well be that for a – I hope for a relatively short period that the Taliban will target our presence hoping that we might withdraw.

Q: But how well are you all prepared for such an offensive?

MR. VENDRELL: Well, this is not something that comes as a surprise. I think that the forces that are in the south have long assumed that they would be a target

and that there would be problems, and this is why it's taking some time for a series of NATO countries, including the Netherlands and Britain to decide to take the bull by the horns and go south.

Q: Can I follow up on that? As you stated, it took a while to convince the Dutch to participate in this. Are you worried that if there are heavy European casualties that the various members who are contributing to the NATO force in Afghanistan will lose their willingness to participate?

MR. VENDRELL: No, I'm not at all concerned about that. I think that up to a year ago, there was a facile approach to Afghanistan by the outside world, particularly by Western countries, the U.S. and Europe included. It had been somewhat assumed that Afghanistan was a success, that the mere toppling of the Taliban and the arrival of a person that we trusted like President Karzai was enough to ensure the success. That was, quite, as I said earlier, it was a facile assumption. The problems of a country that has had a civil conflict for almost 25 years were not going to be resolved in a few months.

I think the good news is that in the last year there is a much greater realization that Afghanistan is a problem that still will require international involvement, both militarily and also from the point of view of reconstruction assistance, for many years to come. And I think if you look at the compact agreed between the Afghan government and the international community in London at the end of January, you will see that there is a very substantive commitment for over the next five years. And I think therefore that the good news is that at a time when in other post-conflict situations the international community is looking for the exit, we are not looking for the exit in Afghanistan. And I think we have learned our lesson of forgetting about Afghanistan during the 1990s.

Q: (Off mike.) Do you consider possible in the next month any European and NATO casualties heavier than actually in Afghanistan? And a second question: Did you already speak with the new Italian government about the Italian engagement in Afghanistan?

MR. VENDRELL: I haven't had the pleasure yet of talking with the new Italian government that has just been installed in Rome. I hope to go to Italy within the next month.

I have to say that it is possible that there will be greater casualties in the coming – during this summer than there have been in the past. The positive thing is that the confrontation that took place last week between Taliban forces – with Taliban forces ended up with severe losses for the Taliban, and that the Canadian – the combined Canadian, Afghan, and coalition forces were able to inflict severe losses on the Taliban.

At the same time, we should not believe that because this has happened that the Taliban will now simply immediately draw the correct lesson. And I think that we are likely to have a difficult summer. And I think it's important that European countries realize that when they send military forces to Afghanistan, they are sending them because there are security problems. We would otherwise be sending civilians. And that when we send military forces to difficult or dangerous areas, that there may be casualties, must as we all try to avoid them.

Q: (Off mike.) What is your view on the drug situation? Some six weeks ago approximately here in the Foreign Press Center here in D.C., the White House, so-called drug czar briefed foreign journalists and gave a very rosy picture of the fight against opium and drugs in Afghanistan. And they are saying that this is probably fast disappearing. Is that truly the case? And on the other hand – (inaudible) – different report from – (inaudible).

MR. VENDRELL: Well, I didn't hear exactly what this gentleman said. But we have to be realistic regarding the issue of narcotics in Afghanistan. It is a very serious problem, particularly for Afghanistan because it has the potential to corrupt the body politic of the country. It is not going to be easy to eliminate the narcotics in a country where narcotics probably is equivalent to at least 50 percent of GDP.

However, we need to make progress, but progress at the beginning in particular is not going to be easy. We need to provide alternative livelihoods. Alternative livelihoods does not mean an alternative crop; it means, for example, providing alternative employment, opportunities. It means providing, for example, building up orchards. Orchards cannot be built and produce fruit overnight. They take five years. You may need to build country roads to deliver the produce from the orchard to the market, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So I think there has to be a realization that at the beginning of this process, which started really in the last year-and-a-half, that progress will be slow, but that we need to build the alternative livelihoods, and at the same time we also need to build up rule-of-law institutions. We don't have at the moment a police worthy of its name. We don't have a judicial system in place. We barely have a penal system and prisons. So this is going to take time.

What should not take time – what should not take time and what can be done much more quickly is to target those Afghan officials who are involved in drug production and trade. There one can and should be demanding the dismissal of these people, even if they are not brought to court. They can be subject to disciplinary measure; mainly the loss of their positions.

Q: May I go back to something you said before? You said that the good news is that we are killing more enemies than in the past.

MR. VENDRELL: I'm sure I didn't use the term killing.

Q: Well, of course, but the casualties of the enemies are more important than other casualties. But it doesn't mean that there are more enemies dying than in the past. This is a bad thing; not a good thing.

MR. VENDRELL: As I said earlier, there is a larger Taliban – larger Taliban activity today than there was a couple of years ago. And they are able to operate in larger numbers. That is not good news.

What I did say, though, is that in the case of this large confrontation that took place last week, the combined forces of the Canadians, the coalition, and the Afghans handled themselves pretty well and inflicted severe losses on the Taliban, which means that if the Taliban persists in these kinds of attacks, they are likely to get a bloody nose.

Q: I was wondering – you know, you talked about the need to crack down on the warlords and the militias, and officials who were involved in the drug trade. Do you think that that can be done without destabilizing the Karzai government?

MR. VENDRELL: It can certainly be done without the destabilizing the Karzai government. President Karzai can count on the security support of the coalition forces and of the NATO forces in case of a confrontation with one of these warlords or commanders.

And may I also add that this is highly unlikely that there would be such a confrontation. President Karzai dismissed from office Marshal Fahim, who was then defense minister and had probably a stronger military capacity than any other commander in the country, and he left peacefully. He removed Ismail Khan as governor of Herat and apart from a brief half a day of riots he left peacefully. And I see no reason why commanders and warlords who have considerable money accumulated would wish to fight when they are able to leave office and continue to live off of the money they amassed over the last few years.

Q: So you mentioned just now about – initially that you – that the Taliban attack was spurred by basically Taliban elements using neighboring territory. And obviously Pakistan has been accused at various times by the United States and also by Afghanistan that their territory is being used by the Taliban. Has the European Union or European diplomats been actively involved in Pakistan in bringing up the issue with them?

MR. VENDRELL: Well, of course, we do bring up this issue – I mean, not only the EU but also the member states in discussions with the Pakistani government.

Q: But how has that been – I mean, over the last few years – I mean, since the Taliban removal, Pakistan has been often accused by this. This is one of the key reasons for the increased Taliban activity.

MR. VENDRELL: I mean, clearly, being able to -- I mean, the Taliban don't emerge just like cabbage emerges from – I mean, they have to come from somewhere, and there is no doubt that Pakistan perhaps could do more. We realize the problems that Pakistan may have in preventing all Taliban elements from crossing. It is an extremely long and difficult border, so inevitably there will be infiltration. But we still would like to believe that Pakistan could do more. And we don't believe in criticizing any country in public, but I think when we do need the Pakistanis, we do convey our concerns.

MR. : Question over here – (off mike).

Q: My name is Hakuhi Gushi (ph) with the – (inaudible) – a Japanese news agency. I have a couple of questions.

I really appreciate it if you can explain today's discussion between you and – (inaudible) – official of the U.S. Department of State and NSC. And my second question is you said that Afghanistan needs international – still international involvement. So my question is so what kind of cooperation can the EU and Japan do in order to reconstruct Afghanistan.

MR. VENDRELL: Well, I think – I mean, the discussions with the administration centered on the kind of issues that I have been discussing, mainly military problems regarding the Taliban, the need to build of rule-of-law institutions, the need to improve governance and to ensure compliance with the commitments entered into in London. We discussed problems regarding narcotics and corruption. And, as I said, on all of these issues, we had an extremely close convergence of views.

As for what can Japan and the EU do, I think we are already doing it. First, both the EU and Japan and giving a large amount of assistance, of financial assistance to Afghanistan. Japan is in the lead for the focal point on the issue of disarmament of illegal armed groups, what is owned as DIAG. We are strongly supporting the EU, the efforts of Japan in this deal because, as I said earlier, unless we disarm these illegal armed groups, we will not be able to make progress on narcotics; we will not be able to make progress on the rule of law; we will not be able to improve governance; and all of this will work in favor of the Taliban. So we attach enormous importance to what Japan is doing, and we want to continue close cooperation with Japan.

As for the EU, we are – apart from the military presence, by the end of the summer, there ought to 18,000 or 17,000 NATO forces in Afghanistan, of which probably some 14,000 approximately are going to come from EU member states. In addition, we are providing approximately \$1 billion in assistance to Afghanistan every year; that is a combined figure from EU member states and the commission. So I think – and I know that Japan is giving a very large amount. We very much welcome this and I'm sure we will continue to work closely in the future.

Q: Can I ask you two things? You have had a long career in the United Nations. In the U.N. jargon, how would you describe these – (inaudible) – peacekeeping, peace enforcement. Is there any –

MR. VENDRELL: I think that is a very good point and I'm glad you raised it. If you read the original resolution adopted in – I think it was in December 2001 establishing ISAF, you will note that it says the Security Council acting under chapter seven of the charter, and furthermore, it authorizes the force to use all means available. Now, in this – in U.N. terms, this means that ISAF, therefore the NATO force now is not only a peacekeeping force but it has also peace enforcement powers.

Somewhat in my view, somewhat to my regret, the interpretation of the mandate received from the Security Council has tended to be that this was a chapter six mandate; that is, peacekeeping, no use of force except if attacked. I think we are slowly coming to the realization that this was probably a mistake and that we need to use robust means to ensure that we can accomplish our tasks, and our task in Afghanistan, apart from taking care of the Taliban, is also to ensure that the decisions of President Karzai are implemented and to use all available means to ensure that.

Q: This is job for NATO and not for Afghans themselves to implement the decision of their government.

MR. VENDRELL: Well, of course it is the main responsibility – it falls on the Afghan government. But the reason why there is an International Security Assistance

-- as the term ISAF, International Security Assistance mission -- is because for the moment, the Afghan government does not have enough means to -- in terms of army or police to take care of its security needs, and therefore we are there to support the Afghan government and extend its authority across the country.

Q: You never mentioned during this briefing the al Qaeda activities in Afghanistan. There are still -- there is still sign of al Qaeda activity in Afghanistan.

MR. VENDRELL: Well, I think that certain -- it is quite clear that there is continual al Qaeda support to the Taliban, and that not every Taliban fighter, what we would call Taliban fighter or Hekmatyar fighter is necessarily an Afghan. And there are clear indications that some of the suicide bombings and other actions that have been -- incidents that have occurred in the last year are being carried out by non-Afghan groups or groups' personnel, I should say. And we believe that there are Arabs and Pakistanis and possibly some Central Asians or Chechens who participate. But I think that the call of the fighting and of the infiltration is done by -- is carried out by the Taliban.

MR. ZEUTHEN: We have got time for just one more question -- two more.

Q: Will the international force live up to their promises? (Inaudible) -- including the United States and the European Union what was promised.

MR. VENDRELL: Actually, yes, it may sound odd because at times the promises and pledges are not matched with deliverance. But if you look at what was pledged in Tokyo in January 2002, and you look at what has been spent by the time of the London conference, you will find that virtually all donors have complied with their commitments. And I think this is something one would have to welcome.

Q: A follow up on that very question -- President Karzai has lamented about how slowly reconstruction has been carried out. Obviously it's natural for him to feel impatient. He's -- he hasn't seen much difference in the infrastructure around the country. What is your own evaluation of Afghanistan -- the fall of 2001, spring 2006? Has a lot been accomplished?

MR. VENDRELL: I think a lot has been accomplished but we have to bear in mind that when we are talking of outside assistance, let us say -- let's state the case of European assistance to Afghanistan, which I mentioned is approximately of about a billion dollars a year. Until recently at least -- I don't know whether this is still the case -- until very recently, 40 percent of European assistance to Afghanistan went into humanitarian assistance. This means food assistance, resettlement of refugees who had returned to Afghanistan. That is not reconstruction and it is not very visible, but essential nonetheless.

Some 20 percent of this assistance, in addition, has gone into paying salaries of the government.

Q: How much?

MR. VENDRELL: Twenty percent approximately. That again is an essential need, but again not visible. You won't see reconstruction projects out of that. So we have been left with 400 million, let's say, a year for reconstruction. And a lot of the projects undertaken have been microeconomic -- let's say building major roads. That

takes time in becoming visible because you don't build a road over night. And maybe the mistake has been or the shortcoming has been not to have undertaken more quick-impact, labor-intensive projects that would have been more visible to the average Afghan.

In addition, we have not explained properly to the Afghans, neither the government nor we internationals, about the huge amount of money that it will take and the huge amount of time that it will take to rebuild Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been almost completely destroyed.

I remember reading about the estimate that the Republic of Korea – the estimation of the Republic of Korea thought it would take to rebuild North Korea if North Korea were to reunify. And the cost was in the hundreds of billions of dollars. And we are now talking of a country which is probably more destroyed than the DPRK is at the moment, and it is going to take a massive influx of funds and time. The country is not in a position also to absorb huge – much more money than it is already absorbing.

So unfortunately it is going to take time. But, yes, we could perhaps have been a little bit cleverer in the way we allocated money. And unfortunately, in many cases, international institutions – for example, the commission – have to allocate money with a lot of time in advance. They do not have the flexibility that we political people would like to see so that you could suddenly spend money in a province where there is now a good governor in place of a corrupt one, and that has political consequences.

Q: A very short question. There has been a huge – (inaudible) –

MR. VENDRELL: For too long.

Q: For Korea. Is that the (most moment?) from the security point of view for Afghanistan you have seen?

MR. VENDRELL: Not really. No. I mean, I think the security situation has had ups and downs that a new phenomenon now – for example, suicide bombings, which were not a pattern three years ago. At the same time, the Afghan national army has become much stronger. There are now 35,000 Afghan – and the army is performing very well. We are in the – we are close to being able to make major progress in the police. So I wouldn't say that this is the worst time. Maybe the only thing I would say is that some of us hope that we would be in a better – in a much better position by now than we are. But I still believe that we will succeed in Afghanistan because of our resolve to stay committed for the long haul and because of the amount of resources that we are putting there, and because the Afghan people are not tired of our presence. They still believe that we have a major role to carry out.

MR. KEUTHEN: Okay, on that note, I think they –

Q: You feel safe? You will go back to Kabul –

MR. VENDRELL: I feel – I have a couple of vehicles which are supposed to be – although I am not sure – (laughter) – bullet proof, and one gets use to it.

Q: Before you leave us, could you give us your pronunciation of your name?

MR. VENDRELL: Well, Francesc Vendrell. It is a Catalan name and so the first C is like an S and the last C is like a K.

Q: Thank you.

MR. KEUTHEN: On that note I would like to thank you all for coming in. Thank you, Mr. Vendrell, for taking the time.

(END)