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**Javier Solana,
EU High Representative
for the Common Foreign and Security Policy,
addresses the Afghanistan Conference
in The Hague**

Javier SOLANA, EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), addressed the Afghanistan Conference in The Hague today, Tuesday, 31 March 2009:

"When I take a look around this room today, I am encouraged. I have attended all the major conferences on Afghanistan, from Berlin to London to Paris to today's meeting in The Hague. Never before have I seen so much international support for our common goal: a stable Afghanistan in a stable regional context.

The recent increase in engagement from neighbouring countries is a positive sign: we have the initiative in the G8-framework and the efforts led by neighbouring countries, such as the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference; the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation discussed Afghanistan last week. It is vital that we all pull in the same direction. Because the stabilisation of Afghanistan is of strategic importance to all of us.

The European Union has contributed to this process since the beginning. Our partnership with Afghanistan is a long-term commitment. We care deeply about this. To me, today's conference marks a new departure. Let me tell you how the European Union sees its future engagement in Afghanistan.

Solutions in Afghanistan will be political, not military. For that reason, the European Union's effort there is of a comprehensive nature: while EU Member States have some 27 000 soldiers on the ground in the framework of ISAF, the European Union will continue to focus its activities largely on governance and the rule of law. Building capacity for the Afghan Government and providing for Afghan ownership of the process at all levels will allow the government to deliver essential services to its citizens and will enable it to directly challenge immediate security threats.

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The European Union's most visible engagement in the field of governance is through our police mission (EUPOL Afghanistan). This targets the heart of governance by building police capacity to ensure the security of Afghan citizens. The European Union has committed itself to doubling the size of this mission and I am happy to announce today that we are on track to fulfil this commitment by the end of the spring. In addition, the Union will continue to be a major contributor to the fund that finances Afghan police salaries.

Credible elections for Afghanistan's leadership are at the very heart of governance as well. That is why Europe attaches great importance to the upcoming presidential and legislative elections. Now that the discussion surrounding the election date is behind us, I urge the domestic political actors in Afghanistan to rally behind this overriding objective. For our part, the European Union will do the utmost to support the electoral process both in terms of funding and in terms of technical assistance - starting with the possibility of an Election Observation Mission, provided the security of our monitors can be guaranteed.

Europe will, of course, also continue to provide financial assistance. Together, the EU and its Member States will have spent about 10 billion USD (8 bn EUR) between 2002 and 2010 in support of the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan. We will closely coordinate this assistance with Kai Eide and the Afghan Government to make sure that these funds make a difference, for instance, to strengthen the agricultural sector, to improve the health services or to pay police salaries.

However, the challenge we face has a far broader regional dimension. For that reason, the European Union is building a comprehensive partnership with the countries of Central Asia. For that reason, the European Union seeks to play a greater role in supporting democratic government in Pakistan in its fight against militant extremists. And for that reason I welcome the fact that Iran has joined us today at the table - a country which has a lot to contribute.

Thank you, Chair, thank you the Netherlands, for organising this conference. It seems to me that the international effort in Afghanistan is more united than ever. Our responsibility to translate this effort into progress on the ground is all the greater for it."
