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**The European Union in Afghanistan:
Impressions of my term as Special Representative**

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Before arriving in Australia 8 months ago, I was witness to one of the world's present hotspots – Afghanistan. I'd like to make a couple of introductory remarks about the nature of my position there. This job was inextricably linked with the European Union's vision. It represents an extension of the Union's original role, to deal with the broader political issues of the day. It is obvious to me that the EU is misunderstood in this country and one of the reasons is that the political dimension of this enterprise is poorly understood. The basic idea of the Union is as a peaceful and prosperous cooperative entity. The enterprise has grown from 6 members in 1957, to 9 in 1973, to 12 members in 1981, to 15 in 1995, and probably to 25 by 2004. As the Union grows in membership, the development of a European security policy becomes increasingly important. Until the end of last year, the focus of the European Union's common foreign policy was on instability near its borders. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia and continuing hostilities in the Middle East are the most notable examples.

The European Union's commitment

The American-led campaign to oust the *Taliban* from Afghanistan made it clear to the European Union that if it wants to play a role politically, it cannot shy from issues of major international contention. After 11 September, it became clear to the Union that international interests lay not only in defeating terrorist cells, but also ensuring the future stability of nations once controlled by these groups. I think the Europeans recognised this earlier than other countries. Once *Al Qaeda* was defeated, the Union decided to convene a conference to determine the way forward for Afghanistan. It was in Bonn under the auspices of the United Nations in late November 2001. The conference itself was highly successful. With the moderating influence of the European Union, the various political factions in Afghanistan came to agree on the future political framework.

After the conference, the German Foreign Minister decided that the EU should send a representative to oversee this transition. By chance, I was elected for a term of 6 months. The Union agreed on a clear mandate of what my task was to be. Some of the

aspects of this mandate included support for the new interim government, ensuring that the rights of women and minority groups are upheld, to fight drug trafficking and production and to convince Afghanistan's neighbours that their interference in this process was unwelcome. This was the political dimension.

The economic dimension was decided one-and-a-half months later in Tokyo where the international community made a pledge for humanitarian assistance for the country's reconstruction. The EU pledged the largest amount of aid - \$US1 billion over the next 5 years. Crucially, then, the EU's commitment was long-term. This was a fine achievement in itself.

In my view, this was effectively a political contract between the new Afghani Government and the international community. It insisted that the new Afghani Government was to follow closely the prescribed political process agreed in Bonn. In turn, the international community agreed to deliver on its pledged assistance.

Having spent six months in Afghanistan, I must admit the initial process was very difficult. There were security problems, both in Kabul and the regions. But there were also difficulties with the political mandate I had. I had to convince the leaders of the merit in following our recommended political processes. The most important of these was impressing the importance of a Human Rights Commission, a political assembly, a judicial commission to consider the new constitution and a new legal system. By June, I think I could say fairly that we had convinced the country's leaders of these imperatives.

The financial situation was dire. The *Taliban* had drained the Central Bank's coffers. Seventy percent of all the buildings were destroyed. When I arrived in Kabul, there were no cars, no roads, no functioning houses, no telephones. By the time I left, this basic infrastructure was slowly being rebuilt. But in terms of my role, this progress is only part of the story.

A united front

Crucially, the European Union was able to present a united and leading role in Afghanistan. One of my chief ambitions was to ensure that the Afghanis understood

what the EU was all about and how its various institutions would cooperate to aid in the country's rebirth. I insisted during my term that the Union's approach was united and that the wider international community recognised it as such. This will be a continuing challenge in future international exercises. Moreover, the Union's role in Afghanistan was a lead role in various capacities, not least the reform of the police force and the fight against drugs. Germany is taking responsibility for retraining the police. The UK took the lead in convincing the government to eradicate poppy plantations before they went to the dealers. The problem here was how to recompense the farmers whose production motives were not illegal. The French are leading the push for a Constitutional Committee. When you go to Afghanistan, you realise for the first time in your life that without a legal basis no country can operate. You can't catch a taxi, cash a cheque or walk the street safely. It's crucial that the Constitutional Commission be established. The traditional legal system needs to be consistent with international legal norms and protocols. In addition, the local Courts need to be rebuilt from scratch. These are no small tasks but they're crucial.

Women's rights

The issue of women's rights looms as another major stumbling block for reform. It's difficult because Afghanistan has had a non-Western system of gender rights for centuries. We reflect our own arrogance by believing that the West has the best system of protecting human rights. The Afghans are keen to address these issues and align their society with international norms but the exact nature of the solution needs time to evolve and cannot be prescribed from the top down. I had the opportunity to speak to many ordinary people in Afghanistan. My impression was that if we overstate this cause of women's rights, we risk negative reactions. There is already a backlash and favour for an Islamic society because of international efforts to impose our system. So we need to be cautious.

The issue of refugees

The problem of refugees is immense. At the start of my mission, the UNHCR estimated there were 2.5 million refugees in Pakistan and 2.5 million refugees in Iran would come back to Afghanistan in stages. Today, there are already 1 million refugees in the country with a total of 2 million estimated by year's end. The task of providing food, shelter and employment is beyond the capacity of the present budget.

More financial assistance is needed as well as a climate of investment. There also needs to be encouragement for people to return to their regions rather than remain in the capital.

The security dilemma

But security is everything. Without security, there is no economic development and no humanitarian assistance programs. We need to train armed forces and to reform the police force. Moreover, these forces must not be dominated by representatives from one region. The cultures of ethnicity are still potential destabilisers in Afghanistan. The small regions need to be considered carefully. On 14 February, the Minister for Civil Aviation was assassinated. On 8 April, the Defence Minister narrowly escaped a similar attempt. Four were killed and fifty injured. On 6 July, the Vice President was assassinated in Kabul. These high level killings continue to happen. So international security forces need to retain their vigilance. The international community is divided on how best to avert these outbreaks. The present administration believes the various regional warlords are included in the rebuilding process. The alternative is to isolate these warlords to erode their financial power and regain national control. I'm not sure of the best approach. But I do believe that Afghanistan must stop giving favour to ethnic groups. After 23 years of war, these differences must be put aside.

The future

If Afghanistan is to become a respected member of the international community, then the community must remain engaged with the country's development for a long time to come. Let me impress again, security issues are most pressing. If an economy is to emerge and thousands of refugees are to have hope for the future, there must be an agreed set of rules with accompanying institutions to enforce them. I believe the European Union has both the capacity and the will to play a leading role in these efforts. By so doing, the Union will begin a new era of engagement in regions outside its immediate geographical sphere of concern.

Questions:

Q: You stated that Afghanistan as a whole wants to become a member of the international community. I wonder if you could elaborate a little on that in light of your analysis that the nation is politically fragmented.

KPK: You have a point. There are a lot of contradictions in this country. There are many differing views. You do wonder how much influence the country's leaders have. An upcoming test is the imminent introduction of the country's new currency. Many have prospered from the old currency and will naturally reject attempts at reform. So, you're right to note the contradictions.

Q: There was a recent article by the Afghan Ambassador in The Australian arguing that the international community's support should be for a moderate Islamic state in Afghanistan. What are the principles that the EU sets for the nation? Is it the liberal-democratic template that we prize in the West or something else?

KPK: A good question. The Bonn Agreement wanted to achieve one thing: that within three years there would be development of a democracy with free elections. We've made a good start with 1,500 delegates present at the first assembly. But the Ambassador raises a good point. The transition of Afghanistan to embrace Western values must inevitably be slow. I would argue that Islamic and Western values need to be carefully combined. I would warn against not addressing the issue. You have to try over a long period of time. At the end of the day, however, it's their decision. They know that our financial support is conditional on the gradual instalment of Western values, but we are not overly prescriptive. They need to decide among themselves. They recognise the imperative of international legitimacy but there's also the issue of internal legitimacy.

Q: What is the current situation with the funding of the warlords? Do you agree with America's past support for the warlords?

KPK: The Government faces a dilemma here. If they try to integrate the warlords within the power structure, you run the risk of inflating their power and their capacity

to rebel. But if you exclude them, there is a chance they will seek alternative funding and threaten whatever power structure emerges in Kabul. America needs to consider its approach carefully. Funding the warlords might be useful to flush out the remnants of Al Qaeda. I don't believe this would send the right message, however.

Q: How fundamentally do you think Afghan society is divided between support for the old regime and eagerness to see a change?

KPK: This is the \$64 million question. There are still strong supporters of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The current government has been unable to convince large sections of the population that a change is needed. This really surprised me. I think it will take generations to effect a unanimous shift in public opinion in favour of what the international community desires.

Q: What about education?

KPK: The international community considers a large-scale program of education as vital. Women were not educated under the Taliban regime. The Government has opened many schools over the past few months. Member countries of the European Union provide a lot of financial and technical assistance. France and Germany are the leaders.

Q: Ambassador, you hinted in your talk that your role extended to monitoring external influences in the country. Are external threats still present?

KPK: The mandate the EU gave me is to observe the policies of the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan. I visited Russia, Iran and Pakistan. I had the impression that all these nations understood the message that it was in their interest not to continue to interfere by giving targeted assistance to certain groups. This would serve to provoke animosity and create new problems. In Iran, the situation is particularly difficult where there are two governments. Russia is not interfering at all. They have proposed to assist the new government in various projects. Pakistan is more worrisome. The current regime seems not to have the power to implement its commitment to the war on terrorism.

Further reflections on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)

KPK: The future of the CFSP ... the EU is very ambitious here. But Europe's culture is one of nation states. I went back to Brussels after my third month in Afghanistan and I told my Ministers that the CFSP will never succeed if the nation states' Foreign Ministers continue to discuss bi-lateral issues. Diplomacy *must* be pitched in multi-lateral terms if the EU's agenda is to be advanced.

There is also the issue of workload. It takes huge effort to gather the various member country views and then promote them with one voice. We probably need better communicative structures, particularly with the prospect of a Union of 25. That said, I don't think the harsh criticism of the Union that you find in this country is justified. There is an extremely positive, underlying dimension to the EU.

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