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Foreign Minister Smith Doorstop at the London Conference on Afghanistan

Topics: Afghanistan, Australian contribution to Afghanistan, General Fonseka, Dutch contribution to Afghanistan

Mr Smith: Thanks very much for turning up. Today we have seen the resolve of the international community reflected by 70 of my colleagues, renewing a commitment to staring down international terrorism in Afghanistan.

There are some very important aspects of this conference. Firstly, a commitment to see the transfer of responsibility for security matters to the Afghanistan Government, but also a transfer of responsibility of development assistance and governance. We’ve also seen commitments from the Afghanistan Government through President Karzai on those issues where the international community needs to see progress. Not just security, but anticorruption, anti-narcotics, provision of services to all of the people of Afghanistan, including and in particular, women and girls, and also a commitment to electoral reform.

So these are areas where in the run-up to the Afghan election, I made it clear that Australia and the international community needed to see progress.

What’s also part of the very strong resolve today is that Afghanistan can’t be won just by a military strategy. It needs to have a civilian development assistance capacity strategy and also a political strategy. And that’s why I have announced today a $50 million contribution to the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund run by the World Bank, and a $25 million contribution to the newly established Peace and Reintegration Fund, established by the Government of Afghanistan with the support of the Conference and the international community.

I’ve also announced $20 million for further de-mining funding for Afghanistan, $4 million of assistance to the Afghanistan Ministry of Agriculture through the Asia Foundation, and $1 million for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission for its operations in Oruzgan province. It’s recently opened an office in Oruzgan.

So this is very important to Australia. We are in the top ten military contributors, we have 1550 troops in Oruzgan province and we’re the largest non-NATO contributor. These commitments and our record also put Australia amongst the top ten civilian development capacity assistance contributors.

The fact that we now have a coherent civil and political strategy, running parallel with the military strategy, is very important. We very strongly support the measures of reintegration and reconciliation. It’s been clear for some time that Afghanistan can’t be won just by military strategy alone.

Very quickly just on some other matters, for Australian journalists present, yesterday I met with Indian Foreign Minister Krishna. I had a very good meeting with him where again, we underlined our joint concern about attacks on Indian students. We resolved this was a difficult issue, which we did not want to get in the way of the good and strong bilateral relationship between Australia and India, which we’ve taken to new levels in the last couple of years. I apprised him of the formation of the High Level Working Group between the Commonwealth and Victoria to deal with these matters and I undertook to keep him regularly provided with information on investigations and prosecutions as they come to hand.

I also had a brief meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and we agreed that we would re-convene the AUSMIN meeting in the first half of this year. We’re working very hard to get some mutually agreeable dates.
I met both with former Afghan Foreign Minister Spanta and his successor, Foreign Minister Rassoul. We discussed Afghanistan generally, and also took the opportunity of raising with the new Foreign Minister, Foreign Minister Rassoul, circumstances surrounding Mr Langdon, who has been convicted of an offence punishable by capital punishment, and indicated to him that if and when Mr Langdon’s appeal processes have been exhausted, if he is still the subject of a capital punishment sentence, the Australian Government will put forward a plea of clemency on his behalf.

Finally, I had a very good meeting with Secretary General Ban, where we discussed the devastation in Haiti. I expressed my personal condolences to him on the loss of UN officials.

He was very welcoming of the substantial contribution Australia has made to the emergency assistance in Haiti, and I indicated to him that as the UN assessments came through for the long-term reconstruction, we would look if there was anything more Australia could do on long-term reconstruction.

I’m happy to respond to any questions on the conference or other matters.

Journalist: Can I just ask about another matter not related to the conference. We’ve had word that the opposition leader in Sri Lanka is seeking exile in Australia. What’s Australia’s response to that, would you be welcoming him in?

Mr Smith: My officials have spoken to our High Commission in Colombo in the last hour.

My advice is that no such approach has been made, so we’re not in receipt of any such approach from General Fonseka.

I think that it is very important that General Fonseka be provided with two things: that he be provided with freedom of movement, and he be provided with security, personal security in the circumstances that he is in.

So we’ve received no such approach on the advice I’ve had over the last half an hour.

Journalist: But he says that he fears for his life, on the advice that we’ve got at this time, and that he is looking to Australia to escape what he says is a potential death sentence. If that were the case, would Australia…

Mr Smith: Well I don’t deal in hypotheticals. On the advice I’ve had in the last half an hour, no such approach has been made by General Fonseka.

Journalist: Would Australia welcome him?

Mr Smith: On matters of asylum and protection, if that is what he has indicated, I don’t make comments or judgments in the hypothetical. My advice in the last half an hour is no such approach has been made by General Fonseka to Australian officials in Colombo in respect of those matters. General Fonseka should be provided freedom of movement by the Sri Lankan authorities, and in the circumstance that he’s now in he should be provided with personal security.

Journalist: But if he’s not?

Mr Smith: He should be provided with freedom of movement and personal security.

Journalist: And if he’s not, Australia would help or not?

Mr Smith: As I say, I don’t deal in hypotheticals when it comes to these matters. He is a Sri Lankan citizen. He’s made no approach, on my advice, to Australian authorities. There is a clear responsibility on the part of the Sri Lankan authorities to provide him with freedom of movement and personal security.

Journalist: What if he made that approach?

Mr Smith: As I said, I don’t deal in hypotheticals in these matters.

Journalist: On the issue of this conference, and there’s been quite a lot of money pledged today, what is Australia’s role in oversight of how that money is going to be secured?

Mr Smith: From the most recent indications, close to $150 million was provided or pledged for the new Peace and Reintegration Fund. If you saw my remarks and my tabled statement, I indicated that Australia’s contribution is something to the development of the governance principles, and also donor countries, substantial donor countries like Australia, having a role in the development of that and in the oversight of it. I’m sure that will occur because it is international
community contributions.

It’s a very good initiative on our judgment and we strongly support it. We’ve made a substantial contribution, as have other nations, and it is consistent with our very strong belief that we need to have a political and a civilian development capacity building strategy, and it’s consistent with both those fronts.

Journalist: Is it about negotiating with the Taliban?

Mr Smith: No, it’s about providing the people of Afghanistan a view that they have a different opportunity, a better opportunity.

We know that there are very many people who fight with and support the Taliban, people who are not international global terrorists, who are not involved in a global jihad, but who see no other role for themselves. That’s why they need to be provided with employment opportunities, they need to be provided with a long-term secure future, they need to be provided with the health and the education services that a nation-state can provide.

So it’s not about buying them off, it’s about showing to the people of Afghanistan that there’s a qualitative difference between hardcore international terrorists associated with Al Qaeda and a person who wants to partake in Afghanistan society formally, who is prepared to, and wants to undertake to comply with the Afghanistan constitution, who eschews violence, and wants to get on with making a better country, a better life for him and his family.

Journalist: How do you avoid the potential moral hazard of paying money to people who are now trying to kill Australian soldiers and Afghan civilians, so that they don’t end up eventually profiting from those activities?

Mr Smith: The moral hazard is avoided by providing the circumstances for improvement in Afghanistan. It’s not about being a different paymaster. It’s about showing to those people that currently see no other alternative or role for themselves, a view of their country which is a safe and secure future where they have a role.

Our approach, the Afghan Government’s approach, the International Security Assistance Force, mandated by the United Nations, takes a totally different approach for international terrorists and those people that associated with Al Qaeda, and those people who are mounting international or global jihad. There is a qualitative difference between the two sorts of people that we’re dealing with, and their views and attitudes.

As President Karzai has made clear in the past, as Special Representative Kai Eide has made clear, as I’ve made clear, we’re talking here about people who are prepared to lay down their arms, eschew violence, abide by the Afghan constitution, and get on with making a better life for themselves and their country.

Journalist: Isn’t it effectively a bribe?

Mr Smith: No, we don’t see it at all in that way. This is about, just as our capacity building, our institution building, our development assistance is about building a nation-state where these services, these opportunities, can be provided by the nation itself. The weakness of the approach in the past, and this is a view that I’ve been articulating for some time, is that we have a mature military strategy in Afghanistan, but we haven’t had, until this point in time, a mature or a well-defined political strategy.

We now have a very clear roadmap for Afghanistan and the international community on developing the capacity of its institutions, on developing its capacity to deliver services to its people, and also a political strategy which says there can be a political settlement with the vast bulk of people in Afghanistan. Not involving Al Qaeda, not involving people on a global jihad, but with the vast bulk of the Afghan people.

Journalist: Is there any confidence that it’s going to reach the right people?

Mr Smith: Well one of the reasons that we want to be involved in the governance arrangements, and one of the reasons we want to be involved in the oversight of the trust fund, is for precisely just that reason. It’s not just Australia saying these things; it’s a shared commitment from the international community and from the Afghanistan Government.

The other point I’d make, which I’d repeat, is that at this conference we’ve seen President Karzai and a range of his Ministers making very clear commitments about better governance, about anti-corruption, about anti-narcotics, about electoral reform, about providing services equally to all Afghan people, including and in particular, women and girls.
Journalist: We’ve been told today that Eide and certain other officials are prepared to see a situation in which the Taliban joined in a government in Afghanistan. Is that something you…

Mr Smith: As I say, I put it in the same category as I’ve outlined previously. There’s no role in Afghan society, there’s no role in Afghan politics, for those people who are supporters of global international terrorism. We are not in association with Al Qaeda, or part of a global jihad.

If people are prepared to lay down their arms, to abide by the Afghan constitution, to take part in the political and democratic process, where arguments are resolved and grievances are resolved through a parliamentary and democratic process, then they are perfectly entitled to try and do what other people do, which is to run for office and form part of a government.

Journalist: So you could see yourself potentially at another conference sitting down with a Taliban Afghan Foreign Minister?

Mr Smith: I could see myself sitting down in the future as I have in the past, whether it has been with Foreign Minister Spanta, or Foreign Minister Rassoul, sitting down and having a conversation with an Afghan Foreign Minister who is committed to the Afghan constitution, who wants to see a better life for the people in this country, who wants to see peace and security restored to his country, who wants to see grievances and difficulties resolved in a parliamentary and democratic way, peacefully and civilly and not have these matters resolved through violence or the force of guns.

Journalist: You said you’re going to put more Australian diplomats and other civilian resources into Afghanistan. How will that happen? Will it be people on the ground in Oruzgan, in Kabul, and will it be a separate Australian Embassy, separate from the American Embassy?

Mr Smith: It will be both. And as I indicated in my formal remarks, we expect the details of these decisions to be effective in a matter of weeks and months rather than months and years.

So we’re bringing our deliberations to a conclusion, we are looking at having more diplomats on the ground in Kabul and in southern Afghanistan.

Journalist: How many?

Mr Smith: I’m not putting a figure on it, and the same for our development assistance officers. When we’ve resolved the details it will be made public.

Journalist: When can…

Mr Smith: I’m not going to speculate on this.

Journalist: A strong theme of the conference today was that the Karzai Government has to lift its game on corruption, electoral fraud, and governance in general. Do you have the feeling that you do have the right partner here, or is it just that they’re the only partner you’ve got?

Mr Smith: Well they are the partner the Afghan people re-elected. I made the point very strongly, both before the election and after the election, that irrespective of the outcome of the election, that the new Afghan Government had to make substantial progress on corruption, on governance, on narcotics, and on the treatment of women and girls. I was very pleased when those commitments were given today by President Karzai, following on from the commitments he gave in his inauguration speech, but also repeated by other Ministers and by other officials.

Journalist: President Karzai mentioned needing international support that would go for another 15 years, is Australia willing to hang around for that long?

Mr Smith: We have never put a timetable on our commitment. Our commitment is to see circumstances emerge in Afghanistan where Afghanistan ceases to be a hotbed or a training ground for international terrorists.

The conference today has been significant because we’ve seen the start of the transition phase, where responsibility for security, the delivery of services, all of these matters, goes to the Afghan Government and the people of Afghanistan. It’s the start of the transition.
Our increased military commitment in April of last year, from 1100 to 1550, was aimed exclusively at training the Afghan National Army in Oruzgan province, where we are based.

And that small illustration is reflected by the theme of today’s conference, it’s the transfer of responsibility, the transfer of the obligation, the transfer of the performance, to the Afghanistan Government. That will take time, and I’ve never and not proposed to put a timetable on it.

We’ve seen the undertakings, and the commitments given, and by the end of this year an additional 300 000 Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police Officers will be in the field. That’s a substantial contribution.

Journalist: Sorry, Afghan National Army and Police?

Mr Smith: And police. We fixed the detail in the course of the conference, and I think Foreign Secretary Miliband also detailed it at his conference.

Journalist: Have you been asked to send more troops during this conference?

Mr Smith: No. We haven’t been asked to send more troops since we announced our increase from 1100 to 1550 in March/April of last year, and I’m not expecting to receive one in the future.

What we’ve done with the commitments we’ve made today, is to put ourselves into a similar position so far as our political and civilian capacity building contribution is concerned. We’re in the top ten contributors on that front, just as we’re in the top ten contributors on the military front, and that reflects our very strong resolve to stare down international terrorism, so that the threat that is produced for all of us in Afghanistan is resolved.

Journalist: When will the Kabul Conference be held and how secure is it going to be? I mean, we’ve got extraordinary security here in the middle of London.

Mr Smith: And there will be tight security in Kabul. The suggestions are that it will be in the first half of this year, and current indications are some time in May.

Journalist: And what will be the purpose of that one?

Mr Smith: The purpose will be to underline the international ongoing commitment to Afghanistan, but also to enable the Afghan Government, through President Karzai and his Ministers, to make their own commitments direct to the Afghan people about improvement in governance, attack on corruption, attack on narcotics, provision of services to all Afghans, and electoral reform. It will essentially, in my view, be a compact between the Karzai Government and the Afghan people, and Afghanistan and the international community.

Journalist: One final question? I’m from the Netherlands. What is according to you the alternative for the Dutch military to stay after August 2010?

Mr Smith: The disposition of the Dutch contribution to Afghanistan, whether it’s military or civilian, is entirely a matter for the Dutch Government. We are strong admirers of the contribution that the Dutch have made, both on the military side and on the development assistance side. But what the Netherlands does with its contribution is a matter for it. I had a very good meeting with my counterpart Maxime Verhagen and we admire very much the contribution that the Dutch have made.

Journalist: You told him?

Mr Smith: I told him I admire very much the contribution the Dutch have made. He knows that. We’re long-standing partners in Oruzgan Province, we have a very good relationship, military-to-military, government-to-government, and also on the civilian capacity building front.

Journalist: Perhaps there may be a small chance they won’t, did you think about it, did you brainstorm with Maxime Verhagen about this?

Mr Smith: What the Dutch do with the disposition of their forces is a matter for the Netherlands. Thank you. Cheers.

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