

The Government's Peace Building Attempts 2001 – 2008

H.E Jawed Ludin

Afghanistan's Ambassador to the Scandinavian Countries, Oslo

To say that peace is a priority for the Afghan government, for Afghanistan and its people is a vigorous understatement. Bringing peace is the essence of what is today going on in Afghanistan, and for the Afghan state, it is its basic *raison d'être*.

What does peace building mean? Firstly, there is the peacemaking element which is about the cessation of violence, ending violent conflict. In any conflict situation the immediate thing to do is to end the violence, and to take actions to bring hostile positions closer to make violence impossible.

Secondly, there is the challenge of sustaining peace. That has to do with a more long term perspective, and more fundamental steps and measures to make that first step peacemaking irreversible. Sustaining peace can be achieved through democratisation, because conflict can be seen as symptom of the lack of democracy, and it makes people interested in durable peace.

Thirdly, there is also the aspirational element of the peace concept which is the “real” peace building, having to do with a society that is free of structural violence, where people have their rights, where the society becomes peaceful in a fundamental way.

The most important thing is that the peace building process is not going on in sequences, and it is not done in these three major steps. All three levels of peace and the three steps are usually happening at the same time.

Afghanistan is still a country at war, but peace in Afghanistan is not a matter which concerns Afghans only, instead it has become a global project. The Afghanistan project that started after 9/11 is not about only putting an end to violence in Afghanistan, it is about ending violence that could potentially be perpetrated by terrorists globally. It is accordingly a global project.

The most important opportunity for the first step of bringing peace in Afghanistan was the Bonn conference in Germany. However, the importance of that conference when it comes to

ending violence and starting a peace process is now questioned. The most important critique is that the Taliban and also Hezb-e Islami, Hekmatyar's party, were not invited. Therefore it was not a peace conference, strictly speaking. Making peace is about bringing hostile positions closer to each other, to compromise, and in Bonn the most important hostile force at that time, the Taliban, was not involved. There was an assumption that they were eliminated, which we now know, in retrospect, was not the case. They were simply removed from Kabul.

The past thirty years have shown that it is very tricky for a government in Afghanistan to base its claim for legitimacy on the pretext of bringing peace and rule of state in the country. It is not only our post-Taliban government over the last seven years, but indeed any other government during the past thirty years has claimed that its aim is to bring peace. The Soviet Union occupation was claimed to be done in the interest of bringing peace when there was risk of civil war after the communist *coup* in 1978. Instead, it became part of a self-perpetuating cycle of violence. The Mujahedin were also essentially fighting for peace, for the return of a sense of normalcy in Afghanistan, but they took Afghanistan to yet another cycle of violence. The same scenario occurred when the Taliban gained power in the country. They also claimed to bring peace, but they did not.

So now the question is: what credence can be attached to our claim today of bringing peace? After all, all the governments before the current one have been claiming to do the same thing, to bring peace. There is one crucial distinction to be made between all the previous governments who claimed to be working for peace, and the present. That difference is in the current democratisation process; in the fact that today we want to sustain peace, make it durable, by building democratic institutions. None of the past governments took any step towards democratisation, towards involving the society and making peace irreversible. The past governments sought to enforce peace by suppressing violence and any opposition to their peace. Whether they were sincere in their claim of bringing peace is irrelevant; they certainly did not try to do what it takes to make peace durable.

For the past seven years the current government has obviously had a large element of suppressing violence, essentially through the fight against terrorism, but it has not had its major focus just on that. The difference is to be found in the democratisation process it has supported. The democratisation process started in 2001. There were the Loya Jirgas, the new constitution which was ratified in 2003, the presidential elections in 2004, and the parliamentary elections in 2005. Focus has been on bringing about democratic institutions that ensure political inclusion and participation. Support has been provided for civil society and this is the main difference between this government and those in the past which also claimed to bring peace.

The aspirational aspect of peace, which is peace building in a society that is free from violence, goes back the questions of rights and to the economic development of the country, where economic deprivation will not create conditions for conflict again. In any conflict, everywhere, there is always a “resource” question at the heart of the problem, even if the conflict has to do with identity. In Afghanistan it has definitely been the case. Therefore, making peace permanent will depend on addressing the long-term economic dynamics of conflict.

This is the conceptual framework where the government's efforts are taking place today.

With the help of the international community, Afghanistan will build and sustain peace by acting on all three levels of enforcing peace by suppressing violence; making peace durable through democratisation; and making peace permanent through economic development.

I wish to address some of the specific issues that emerge when discussing peace building in Afghanistan. One core issue is the matter of justice versus peace. The question was originally raised in 2001 at the Bonn Conference. The whole term of peace versus justice is a false dichotomy. First of all it has to be clarified that peace can never be versus justice. It is true that, if there is no peace, then there cannot be any justice or vice-versa. It is also important that justice cannot be sacrificed for the sake of bringing peace.

Ambassador Brahimi spoke of this dichotomy when he was mediating the Bonn talks and later when he was representing United Nations in Afghanistan. He explained why Afghanistan cannot press the question of past abuses and records, in relation to people who became involved in the government, the cabinet, and the parliament. Why was that? Well, maybe he thought that bringing peace by ending violence and war was a more pressing priority at the time than investigating past abuses, while it should not be forgotten that it is only a question of sequencing. Not one or the other, but making first things first!

However, the challenge on that front was the steps that were taken for peace in 2001, some of which were steps that are known to have undermined the government's ability to achieve justice later on. So the key is, if we do have to deal with this false dichotomy of peace versus justice, where there is a pressing need to end violence and achieve peace, and where we can only have peace and justice in a sequence, then we must do peace in a way that would not later jeopardize the possibility to do justice.

The next concern is the question of military action as a way to bring peace. Afghanistan is still a country at war and the dynamics of violence are still present, like they were in 2001. Terrorism is still there and Pakistan is an important factor. The connection that we sometimes make between work for peace and peaceful means for bringing peace is not realistic. It is not effective and it is not probably even desirable. Military action, whether it is regarded as positive or not, remains the primary measure for bringing peace in Afghanistan, because peace in Afghanistan, at least in its most overt sense is threatened by forces that militarily exist. At some level it is a question of social justice, of political inclusion and of institutionalising democracy like any other society, but the peace that we are concerned about, that we want, can primarily be achieved through military means, but not only through them. Other means are needed in addition to the military challenge.

In discussions with NATO, not necessarily the official ones but sometimes the ones that take place on the fringes, the question of a political solution is increasingly being raised. This sounds good, but if it is meant as an alternative to military action it is not

realistic. Some of the involved military generals of NATO are surprisingly giving interviews to media, saying that a military war cannot be won, and by doing so inadvertently reinforce the perception that NATO and the whole military exercise are failing.

Political solutions in today's context in Afghanistan can only work if used as a secondary measure that must go hand in hand with a very strong military posture. Against a force as nihilistic as terrorism, enough political will cannot be mobilised to make political solutions desirable. The terrorists are prepared to die for their cause. On the other hand, they are not an organised opposition, 'Taliban' is a label for a dangerous, nihilistic ideology that produces suicide bombers, which can be seen today in Afghanistan. It is in relation to this that political solutions and reconciliation must be looked upon – you cannot reconcile with the ideology of terrorism.

Having said that, a political solution, or the political element of the solution, is not only possible, it is happening already. It started in 2002 when President Hamid Karzai made a famous statement which said that Afghanistan is the home of all Afghans. The only exception was those who had connection with al-Qaida or were involved in acts of terrorism. The process of welcoming Afghans back continues, and in the past few years specific measures have been taken. A commission was established in 2004, by professor Mujadidi, to proactively encourage Afghans to return, especially from Pakistan. This work is still continuing.

A new dimension to this process that has come up in recent times is the talk about negotiations with Taliban. The change of the regime and the new administration in Pakistan have brought a new opportunity to break the systematic support and networks that exist to the Taliban in Pakistan, which are at work to train, mobilise and deploy them inside Afghanistan. There is a hope that if that link can be broken with the help from the new Pakistani government, then those people who are caught in the system should not be ignored and left stranded, they should have the possibility to return to normal civilian lives. That is why this process has gained some momentum over the last year.

Then there is the specific example of the negotiations in Saudi Arabia which is being talked about these days. It has much to do with the diplomacy between Afghanistan and Pakistan in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has a very influential role, not least over the establishment in Pakistan. The consensus, the new language and relation that is now created between President Hamid Karzai and President Zardari and the new regime in Pakistan has to be developed, has to be broadened, and Saudi Arabia can play a positive role in this. It seems that, on this particular occasion, the Saudi establishment just took a purely ad hoc step to invite some persons who had not met earlier, including some former Taliban officials, just for an informal discussion. So basically there are not any official negotiations taking place at the moment, and none are even likely to take place any time soon.

Political solution is very much a question of giving a broader dimension to the diplomacy that is going on with Pakistan. It is about where those people, the Taliban, would go were they to be freed from the patronage of the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) and the religious parties in Pakistan. A channel needs to be provided for these people and, in general, that is what this political solution means to us. To be sure, political solution is not an exit strategy, as some might understand it, nor is it an alternative to military action. It is something that needs to be done to win in Afghanistan.

One important element, which has to do with building peace in Afghanistan is Afghanistan's efforts at international diplomacy over the past seven years. In Afghanistan the positive aspect of the international dimension of the peace process is the fact that the international community – the world – is involved. The international intervention in Afghanistan is not just a marginal humanitarian effort that the international community uses in other places in the world, for example in Africa, where it is active in many places mainly for humanitarian reasons. In Afghanistan it is serious, since it concerns the security of the whole world.

Despite the sometimes cynical views that exist in the outside world about Afghanistan – that Afghanistan was never a state and that it will never be peaceful and so on – there is no denying of the fact that there is a true and real connection between security

of Afghanistan and security in the rest of the world. This gives hope that the world will follow through on its commitment despite the problems and challenge that Afghanistan is facing now.

The negative aspect of the international dimension involves the role that foreign states have in perpetuating the current conflict. Pakistan is the most obvious example. To address this challenge, the Afghan government has undertaken sustained, and often difficult, diplomacy on the one hand with Pakistan, and on the other hand with the West and the United States. With President Musharraf, when he was the president, our goal was to see if there was any possibility that Pakistan could reconcile its conception of strategic depth with the stability and prosperity of Afghanistan. President Karzai always conveyed to President Musharraf that Pakistan's real strategic depth was in friendship and partnership with Afghanistan. However, this did not work, because that whole concept of strategic depth, embedded in the Pakistani strategic circles, was geared towards instability in Afghanistan. The dynamics have changed significantly with President Zardari and the new civilian government, who share much our fears with regards to terrorism. However, real, tangible results are yet to be seen.

In terms of Afghanistan's diplomacy with the West and the United States, the objective was to convince them that the real danger was emanating from Pakistan and not from the villages of Afghanistan. This element of government diplomacy has been rather successful, as we can see today, although much valuable time has been lost.

There is a new President-elect in the United States. The Afghan people and the Afghan government have high hopes that, in addition to what Barack Obama has already said in terms of policies and ambitions for Afghanistan and the region, he will not start from scratch and be obliged to relearn the same lessons as the Bush administration. In the last seven years, a lot of government efforts went astray since it was a slow learning process for the outside world about the realities of the region. But the Bush administration did learn and it did turn around positively on many counts. Lessons have to be learned, and the

most important lesson has to do with the role of Pakistan in that region.

There is still a certain gloom in media over the security situation but also over the government's control of its territory. This is understandable, given the negative trend over the past few years. In 2004, the Afghan government lost its control over the first district to fall under the Taliban, the district of Miyannasheen in Kandahar. It was the first district ever that was taken by a Taliban assault. The government took it back the following day in a few hours, but the result of this Taliban attack was greater than the control of one district. It was a trend that was set off. The confidence was broken between the people, the government and international community. Due to that trend, today there are many districts that are not under government control. Helmand, for example, is suffering terribly. This trend must be stopped and reversed.

Looking to the future, there also positive trends building momentum. The most important thing that has happened recently in the government in Kabul is the reshuffling in the cabinet with Haneef Atmar appointed Minister of Interior. For the first time in the past seven years, at least in the security efforts there is a real team sense at the heart of the security establishment in the government. The Minister of Interior, who is in charge of the police which has had a hard time, has some specific ideas about how to turn the security situation around in the few months between now and the election.

And of course, it must be emphasised that he elections are absolutely vital. There should not be a discussion about whether or not they are possible. They must to come through. Efforts are going on with recent changes made, others ought to follow. A last hope from the people is that the country is able to have these elections in September 2009. Regardless of the outcome, the elections will be a true step towards peace, because that will sustain peace.