

Speech by German foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle MP at Opening the Afghanistan Conference in Bonn on December 5, 2011

Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Your Highnesses,
Dear Madam Chancellor,
Excellencies,
distinguished colleagues,
Dear Zalmay Rassoul,

It is a great pleasure and honour to welcome you all to Germany and to my home town Bonn.

Mr. Secretary General: for you this must feel like a home-coming. Not only because Bonn is Germany's "City of the United Nations". But with so many countries present here, it looks like a little General Assembly moved from the East River to the Rhine! Exactly 100 delegations and over a 1.000 delegates are attending.

For the past ten years, an alliance of nations spanning the globe has been engaged in Afghanistan.

At the beginning of this engagement, there was an event that shook the very foundations of our societies. The attacks in New York and in Washington, the deadliest terrorist attacks the world has ever seen. Casablanca, Madrid, London and other places followed. It was our duty to ensure that those responsible for these atrocities could never threaten us again.

Since then, men and women from over fifty countries have fought alongside Afghan forces. Many of our soldiers have paid the ultimate price. Innocent Afghan children, women and men have lost their lives. As we look to the future and see an Afghanistan secure and at peace, we honour the memory of all those that should still be alive today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A stable and peaceful Afghanistan which does not pose a threat to the world is in the interest of all of us. There have been setbacks. Not all our objectives and expectations have been realistic.

And yet, we have achieved a lot. Most Afghans now enjoy more freedom, peace and security than at any time in the past thirty years. We have learnt that there is no military solution. There can be only a political solution. We are now reaching a crucial turning point. The withdrawal of troops has begun. By the end of 2014 international combat forces will have left the country.

A sovereign Afghanistan will assume full responsibility for the security of its citizens. We are working together to make that possible.

The goal of this conference will be to lay the groundwork for a free, secure and prosperous Afghanistan. We send a clear message to the people of Afghanistan: we will not leave you alone, you will not be abandoned! Afghanistan and its people need a clear and reliable commitment to a long-term engagement for the next decade beyond 2014.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Three topics are of particular importance:

First, the transition process is underway. It will prepare the ground for the withdrawal of international combat troops and consolidate the authority of government. To ensure that it is irreversible, Afghanistan must focus on strengthening public administration, reinforcing the rule of law and fighting corruption.

Second, political support for Afghan reconciliation must be kept up. Despite severe setbacks reconciliation is the path to durable and inclusive peace.

Third, our long-term engagement needs to be clearly defined. This means continued civilian reconstruction, support for the Afghan national security forces for as long as necessary, and helping the country unlock its enormous economic potential. The international community must stand ready for continued practical and financial support. As German Foreign Minister I will add: Germany stands ready to support Afghanistan for the decade beyond 2014.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The road ahead will remain stony and difficult. It will require endurance and tenacity. The international engagement for Afghanistan will continue, but it will be different. It will focus on reconstruction and development. At the same time the Afghan government will continue to improve governance and further reconciliation. These mutual credible commitments between Afghanistan and the international community will form the foundation of our new partnership.

Let me conclude with a personal experience: I have been to Afghanistan many times. During my visit to Kabul last July I was deeply moved when I visited a small youth centre. I saw children playing like children play all over the world. I looked into their eyes. I saw hope. This is the new face of Afghanistan. We owe it to these children, that their hopes will not be deceived. We owe it to our own security and much more, we owe it to the young Afghan generation that we succeed!

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome you to Germany and to Bonn! We all wish this conference every success.

And now it is my privilege to give the floor to His Excellency, President Hamid Karzai.