

# UNAMA

## United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit, Kabul, Afghanistan

### Press Conference

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#### **PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)**

**Ambassador Peter Wittig, Germany's Permanent Representative to the United Nations; Chair of the UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict; and of the UN Security Council Resolution 1267 (1999) Committee concerning the Al-Qaida and Taliban sanctions regime**

**Kabul – 7 June 2011**

**Nilab Mobarez, UNAMA Spokesperson:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to our press conference today. Today we are joined by Ambassador Peter Wittig. Peter Wittig is Germany's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, President of the UN Security Council for the month of July, Chair of the UN Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and Chair of the UN Security Council Resolution 1267 Committee concerning Al-Qaida and the Taliban, and also in charge of the Security Council file on Afghanistan. Without further delay, we give the floor to Mr. Wittig.

**Ambassador Peter Wittig:** Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to see you here. Thank you for your interest. I am visiting, as was said, your country, in my capacity as a Security Council member and as Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children in Armed Conflict.

The Security Council attaches very high importance to the protection of civilians in the many armed conflicts in the world, and in particular to the protection of the rights of children.

The Security Council is of the firm belief that phenomena like recruitment of children as child soldiers and fighters, killing and maiming, abduction, sexual abuse, and attacks on schools and hospitals have to stop and have to be sanctioned.

My country, Germany, will organize in the Security Council in the month of July a debate that will revolve around the protection of children in armed conflicts, and puts particular focus on attacks on schools and hospitals. We want to adopt a resolution that warns potential perpetrators who commit those acts and will issue a general message that governments and armed groups should protect schools better.

Now the visit to this country was driven by the desire to get a first-hand impression, to speak to the various interlocutors. We met representatives of the Government, of Parliament, of civil society. We met also religious leaders. We wanted also to convey our messages to enhance the protection of children in this country, and we wanted to learn from them how the situation has evolved. We will of course report to the Security Council.

We were encouraged and pleased to hear that a large majority of our interlocutors, and we have the feeling a large majority of the Afghan people, share our concerns and believe that education is important for the future of this country.

We were also encouraged by the commitment of the Afghan authorities that they undertook in the framework in the Action Plan to protect the rights of children, and to implement the various commitments to breathe life into them. And we ensured the Afghan authorities of our support and our longstanding and sustained commitment to work together with them to enhance and improve the situation of children in this country.

During our visit, we learned also about a decree, reports about a decree that the Taliban issued in essence banning attacks on schools. We also learned about recent indications that the number of documented attacks against schools and educational facilities has dropped. Nevertheless, schools, students and educational personnel have been attacked in the past and continue to be attacked, and of course that is a cause of concern for us.

While we acknowledge and take note of the efforts in this regard, we call on the Taliban to provide more information on their position and to demonstrate their sustained commitment.

We also acknowledge the Taliban's recent statement that they have a minimum standard for recruitment. We remind the Taliban and all the other armed groups in Afghanistan that according to international standards, children are all persons under the age of 18. Incidentally, Afghanistan has signed the Additional Protocol to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child which stipulates exactly that.

We call on the Taliban and all other armed groups to provide information on their actions to exclude people under 18 – children – from recruitment to their ranks.

At the same time, we also request the international armed forces and the Afghan security forces to provide information on standard operating procedures for treatment of children under 18 who have been captured or who have escaped from armed opposition groups.

We also request that the United Nations be given access to those children in detention in order to assess their personal needs and provide the necessary support to them.

Let me close with two points. Afghanistan is going through a transitional phase and has seen the intensification of armed conflict in some areas. We are especially concerned about the devastating impact of IEDs on children. And we are appalled by the use of children as suicide bombers. In all our meetings, we also recognized that the Afghan people feel very strongly about civilian casualties in general.

We want to remind all actors that their procedures, their tactics, do not result in civilian casualties, especially in hurting children and other civilians. Violations, incidents, should be investigated.

My last point, I come back to the issue of education. The right of education should be safeguarded, especially in times of armed conflict. In this light, children's access to education should be protected and armed forces, armed groups, should not base soldiers in school buildings. If this turns out to be absolutely necessary, alternative sites for education must be provided. Under all circumstances it should be avoided to use facilities concurrently for military

and education purposes. That has to be avoided in all circumstances.

In closing, let me emphasize that we are encouraged by the commitments made, by the intentions we have heard to protect the rights of children across the board, but at the same time emphasize that huge challenges remain. We have the feeling that the Afghans themselves care about their children, about their rights, about education, and we bring this message back to the Security Council. We will keep on the agenda the Afghan situation and will keep on monitoring the situation very closely.

Now I am ready for your questions if you have any.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Noor TV:** The question is regarding the use of children as bombers. The other day the spokesperson of the National Security Directorate said that right now hundreds of children are being trained as suicide bombers across the border. I would like to know whether you have touched on this issue while you were meeting with your interlocutors and whether you will take this message to the Security Council and what will be the message to the Pakistani side in this regard.

**Ambassador Peter Wittig:** We are concerned by the violations of the rights of children wherever they happen. During this visit we focussed on Afghanistan. In other visits we focus on other countries. But the phenomenon that you are discussing is a matter of great concern and it is on the radar screen of the Security Council, rest assured.

**Reuters:** Obviously a lot of the abuses are happening on the Taliban side and they are hard to have a dialogue with. As you are speaking to the Afghan Government, I wonder if you have discussed allegations on the underage recruitment in the Afghan police and army and also of child abuse by Afghan troops?

**Ambassador Peter Wittig:** Yes, we discussed it with the officials in the Ministry of the Interior and with police officials. We raised our concerns and also we noted progress that has been made. There is a very intensive dialogue between UNAMA - the UN Mission here - and the police authorities. There is a very elaborate structure between the Afghan Government and UNAMA to make progress across the board on those violations that I mentioned. So yes, we discussed it, we raised it and we also detected commitments and progress made.

**Reuters, follow up:** Can you give us any concrete details on what progress you have seen, that is recruitment techniques or ways of checking, just to explain people what progress is?

**Ambassador Peter Wittig:** Orders to the police units to desist from recruiting, a certain vigilance, investigations and a general commitment to improve the situation.

**8 AM Daily News [translated from Dari]:** Referring to your debate that will be held in the month of July, and as the Head of the Security Council you will be holding that debate. Also you mentioned that you will discuss the issue of those who are attacking schools and medical facilities that you try to stigmatize and make them accountable. So what kind of action will you take against those perpetrators? Would it be more sanctions against the Taliban or what kind of actions would that be?

**Ambassador Wittig:** The resolution and the debate we envisage revolves around the general theme of protection of children in armed conflict but more specifically on attacks on schools and health facilities. Now in general the UN has a, if I may say so, carrot and stick approach. The UN talks to governments and also to armed groups in order to encourage them not to violate children's rights. But it has also sticks. One stick is a "naming and shaming list". And another one is to facilitate, if perpetrators do not desist from violating children's rights, a possibility to putting them in a sanction list of the Security Council. So we do both: encouragement; if that does not help, sanctions.

**CNN:** Has NATO responded to persistent complaints about civilian casualties by night raids and bombings?

**Ambassador Wittig:** I have to tell you, this meeting has yet to take place. We are going to see members of the command of ISAF this afternoon.

**CNN, follow-up question:** But so far?

**Ambassador Wittig:** We have not discussed it with them yet. I can brief you after the meeting.

**Follow-up question:** But your opinion so far. This problem is five, six, seven years old?

**Ambassador Wittig:** Let's have that meeting first before I comment on it.

**Aunohita Mojumdar, freelance journalist:** You described this visit as a first-hand experience. You talk to both armed groups and governments in general, but in the case of Afghanistan all your meetings have been with the Government and those in support of the Government. Why were you not able to establish direct contacts with the armed insurgents? Was this a lack of capacity or a political decision on your part? And related to that, you were talking about imposing sanctions on those who do not accept the concept of children's rights – attack schools, etc – so is your process of delisting some of the previous insurgents, Taliban leaders etc, from the UN Security Council so called blacklist going to be linked to their acceptance of some of these basic rights including stopping attacks on schools?

**Ambassador Peter Wittig:** Thank you for that question. First of all, our contacts went beyond Government officials. We met extensively with members of civil society and we met religious leaders. But we did not meet the Taliban, for reasons that refer to the overall political and security situation. As far as the sanction system is concerned, I referred to the possibility to list perpetrators in this sphere, violations of children's rights, in extreme cases, on the sanction lists of the United Nations, of the Security Council. That has been done in other cases in other countries, a couple of times. That is the last resort. As I said there are other measures, naming and shaming. But we have this last resort, but it is not being done very frequently. The delisting effort that is being undertaken right now in the framework of the Al-Qaida sanctions committee is not related to that issue.

**Noorin TV [translated from Dari]:** My question is about the black list. Recently there have been reports that the United Nations, based on the request of the Afghan Government, has started reviewing to delist some of the Taliban commanders from their blacklist. I wanted to know where you are with this and how many people are on this list?

**Ambassador Peter Wittig:** Yes, you refer to the Al-Qaida and Taliban sanctions committee that is a regular delisting procedure. You are right, there are a number of delisting requests on the table of the Committee, and they are being examined as we speak. A decision on a number of delisting requests will have to be made by mid-June. I am confident that there will be some delisting taking place by then but that pertains to the authority of the Security Council sanctions committee which has to decide by up to mid-June. Of course I cannot prejudge the decision, but I expect a number of delistings by mid-June.

**AFP:** Is the delisting report you just talked about related to the reports of early negotiations going on with Taliban commanders?

**Ambassador Peter Wittig** The delisting decisions are made on the grounds of extensive information that has been – and will be – provided to the committee and the question there is “does the individual still pose a terrorist threat?” That is the criteria to delist an individual, but this of course is linked to the overall political situation and the Security Council and the members of the sanctions committee are aware there is a political process going on.

I thank you for your interest.

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United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)  
Kabul, Afghanistan  
<http://unama.unmissions.org>  
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