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UNAMA

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit, Kabul, Afghanistan

<http://unama.unmissions.org>

**Near verbatim transcript of the memorial ceremony for seven UN colleagues killed in Mazar-e-Sharif
Kabul, 5 April 2011**

Staffan de Mistura: Excellencies, Friends, Colleagues, thank you for being here today with us. I would like now to ask first our friends who represent the colleagues who died to light candles to symbolize their lives, their deaths and our gratitude and memory for each one of them. May I ask first our friends who represent the colleagues who died to light candles to symbolize their lives, their deaths and our gratitude and memory for each one of them.

Chitra, please on behalf of the Ghurkas, the four Ghurkas who died for the UN, with the UN, please come with me.

(Friends, colleagues and national representatives light candles)

Staffan de Mistura: Siri Skare, Joakim Dungel, Filaret Motco, Min Bahadur Thapa, Chhabi Lal Purja Pun, Dil Prasad Gurung, Narayan Bahadur Thapa Magar. They all died on Friday in the late afternoon in Mazar-e-Sharif. They were all inside the UN compound. It was Friday and they were working. They had something to do which was related to future plans of UNAMA in Mazar-e-Sharif. A major demonstration took place. It was originally starting to be peaceful. It was related to the unspeakable decision by a person to burn the Holy Koran and they were marching peacefully. The march turned violent. Some instigators, some infiltrated people turned the march into what became a massacre. The whole office was destroyed. All seven of them died.

There are many questions that we should and could raise to ourselves on this occasion. There are many questions that need an answer. We will go through that. Questions about whether we should have been better prepared. Whether we should have been foreseeing a demonstration turning like this. Whether we could have been better helped. Whether the police, which was meant to protect the building, were able to come and do what would have avoided that horrible attack. And on top of it, other questions. Questions I and my colleagues have been asking ourselves.

Last night, when I was going through a virtually sleepless night, I was thinking about it. I was wondering what went wrong, what is wrong about it. Why no one in that demonstration among the 3,000 Afghans who were there, didn't stand before these 15-17 infiltrators and say, "Wait, wait a moment. Don't you know these are the people who have been here for 50 years? These are the people who were there during the time the king was there, these are the people who were there during the time of the mujahideen, during the time of the Taliban, and are still there and will be there, *inshallah*, even after many of the foreigners who are currently actively involved in Afghanistan would have left. These are the ones who have been vaccinating people. These

are the ones who have been involved in human rights, in schools, in helping you to actually try to do what you want to do on your own feet.”

That didn't happen.

So we are going through a soul searching. We are questioning, we will be questioning whether we should be actually refocusing the way we are perceived by the Afghan people, and the way both Afghan authorities and non-authorities perhaps have been sometimes rhetorically emphasizing more on the weaknesses of the UN rather than on what is being the strength and the dedication by the people who are going to continue if they want to work here. All that, anyway, will be reviewed later. Now, today, we are not going to answer those questions. We are going, instead, to honour with respect, with dignity, with affection and gratitude, those who died for the UN, with the UN, and for Afghanistan.

May I ask on behalf of the Secretary-General, Under Secretary-General Nambiar to come here.

Vijay Nambiar: Your Excellencies, Foreign Minister, Your Excellencies Ambassadors, Pavel Erchov, friends and colleagues.

We are gathered together here today at a moment of great tragedy and sadness. We have lost seven colleagues: Joakim Dungel of Sweden, Filaret Motco of Romania, and Lieutenant Colonel Siri Skare of Norway, as well as four Nepalese security guards: Min Bahadur Thapa, Chadilal Purja Pun, Narayan Bahadur Thapa Magar, and Dil Prasad Gurung. These brave men and women gave their lives trying to defend the UNAMA office compound in Mazar-e-Sharif last Friday.

The thoughts and prayers of the UN family everywhere are with you now and with the next of kin of our fallen colleagues. It is a privilege for me to be among you. The Secretary-General has asked me to convey to you his deep appreciation for your work as well as his own personal anguish at Friday's tragedy.

We are standing here united by a common bond, not only of grief for our colleagues, but of solidarity with each other. The work of our colleagues is done and they have gained eternal rest. In these cold hours so soon after they have been taken away from us, it is sometimes more difficult for us to actually be alive here.

Our fallen colleagues found their ways to Afghanistan along very different paths, as we all have. They were, as we all are, committed to a noble purpose—to apply our talents, our courage, and our dedication to reduce the suffering of our fellow global citizens. We represent, through our work, the uplifting and necessary human aspiration that violence, poverty and intolerance need not be the unrelieved fate of humankind. This is a steady aspiration. It breeds in us a long term commitment to provide hope where there is despair and some measure of comfort where there is none. Sometimes we are overwhelmed, but ours is not just a future cause. It is a present one. Humanity depends on it, today more than ever.

As with all great purposes, this is not an easy cause. Three times in the last three years the United Nations has been directly attacked. Two of these attacks have resulted in fatalities. We at UN headquarters have to face a certain responsibility. The first is to understand that no matter what kind of security measures we put in place, we will remain vulnerable. We rely for protection on the goodwill of our Afghan hosts and our neighbours. We experience that goodwill every day. Each one of you has felt it, among Afghan colleagues and friends.

But the goodwill of our partners and the goodness of our intentions have too frequently not been enough. We at the leadership levels of this Organization also need to look at what more we can do to provide you the conditions of work that you deserve. This means engaging more with the Council members who draft our mandate. It means looking at the budget and at human resources policies. We cannot allow a situation to endure where we are either so open that we are vulnerable to those who target us, or so secure that we cannot be effective. We will need to conduct a comprehensive review of our objectives in Afghanistan and how we are deployed to meet them. We must reassess the risk we are exposing you to against what that risk allows us to deliver. Not because we have not been effective. Because we cannot be effective in the future if we are exposed to constant and unacceptable levels of risk.

Nobody can deny the importance of the work that each of you do every day, across this country, working closely with Afghan colleagues and partners. When you are selected to work for the United Nations, it is because of your particular skills and your commitment to the ideals of the Organization. Everyone who has been hired by the UN has had to prove their knowledge and their idealism through a rigorous process that ensures that only the best in the world are selected. Courage, though, is not necessarily a core competency. Yet here in Afghanistan you have demonstrated extraordinary courage every day. As an organization we do not have the right to ask for such courage. As individuals devoted to the highest ideals, you have given it without being asked. For this you have earned the gratitude of every human being who desires peace and dignity.

Our colleagues have paid a terrible price for their courage. Their work will be remembered. They will be remembered in many different ways by all of you whose lives they graced with their unique presences.

Now we send them to their homes across the globe, from our UN family to their respective families. We send them with an overwhelming sense of sorrow and pride. Sorrow predominates of course. Sorrow at their sacrifice. But also pride. Pride in their work, their idealism, their indomitable determination to represent the very best of what mankind can and must be.

May their souls rest in peace; and their memory continue to inspire us.

Staffan de Mistura: May I ask Dr Spanta to come here on behalf of the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, President Karzai. Thank you.

Dr Rangin Spanta: *Bismillah Rahman Rahim*, Under Secretary General Nambiar, honourable SRSG de Mistura, Family of United Nations, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a matter of profound regret to attend this event. Even for us who have endured decades of violence and suffering, what happened in Mazar-e-Sharif is beyond comprehension. It was indeed a tragedy that cannot be justified by any justification. Particularly since it happened in the birth place of the great poet and Sufi advocate of tolerance, Jalaluddin Balkhi Rumi, and during the beginning of our new year.

On behalf of President Karzai, the President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, I offer my sincere condolences to the family, colleagues and friends of those who have lost their precious lives.

The burning of the Holy Quran and the ensuing events were not the first isolated events. They are antitheses to our global struggle to build a just, human and peaceful world. A world where differences are celebrated and respected. A world that is united on the basis of our common humanity and universal ideals of justice, fraternity, solidarity, equality, freedom and peaceful coexistence of differences and mutual respect.

This struggle has been a difficult but productive and proud journey, overcoming slavery, religious wars and the colonial era and fascism.

Our latest challenge and threat is fundamentalism in many countries.

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen, world peace and indeed our civilization are threatened by the threat and challenges of fundamentalism which are now present in every culture and religion.

Forces and mindsets that have differences in the complexity of human beings in the world, and in this struggle our unity, resolve and patience are the key to our success. Our most effective and enduring response to intolerance, hatred, extremism and fundamentalism are redoubling our efforts and commitments to ideals and a culture of tolerance, mutual respect and into action. It is my firm conviction that extremists, who are a very small minority, do not represent the great and human Islamic civilization.

Equally the irresponsible act of one single fundamentalist so-called pastor does not equate with the ideas or principles of democracy or western civilization. It is our sincere hope that the tragic event of Mazar-e-Sharif should not discourage international resolve, solidarity and commitment to the Afghan people.

Afghan men, women and children have been paying the heaviest price during the last three decades. They should not be further punished for the crime of a handful of individuals who have taken hostage their religion and nation.

Let me conclude by reiterating our absolute commitment and determination to bring to justice those who are responsible for this heinous crime.

Let us pray for all who have paid the ultimate sacrifice and helping bring about a better, just and peaceful world and the realization of the ideals of the United Nations.

I thank you.

Staffan de Mistura: May I ask his Excellency Minister Rassoul to be with us.

Zalmai Rassoul: *Bismillah Rahman Rahim.* Dear Staffan de Mistura, my friend, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, indeed it is a sad day. I wanted on behalf of the Afghan Government to introduce our sincere condolences and strong condolences for this horrible attack on the United Nations personnel in Mazar-e-Sharif. These condolences go to their families, their loved ones, to the United Nations, to UNAMA and all their people who by them they have been helped. The Afghan Government is fully committed, Staffan, to do everything it can to protect UNAMA personnel in Afghanistan and I hope strongly that this kind of horrible tragedy will not happen anymore. At the same time, I would like to thank again on behalf of the Afghan people, all the support and help that UNAMA's personnel has provided to the people of Afghanistan. Thank you very much.

Staffan de Mistura: Our colleagues who died had friends, had colleagues and they shared a lot together. Even if in one case for instance it was only seven weeks, as was the case of Joakim, he had already become extremely popular among his own colleagues, so I would like to ask Niki, please to speak about Joakim:

Niki Moss: Good morning, thank you for allowing me to speak today about my dear friend Joakim. Joakim arrived in the mission on the 17th of February. Three days later he turned 33 years old. When I first met Joakim three years ago in Freetown, Sierra Leone, he was exiting a Landcruiser in front of what was to become our shared residence. At 105 kilogrammes, his presence nearly dwarfed the vehicle. This fitness fanatic who initially intimidated me both by his size and his intellectual prowess, turned out to be a gentle soul. He quickly adapted to the rhythms of both working in the Appeals Chambers of the Special Court for Sierra Leone as well as the pace of West Africa. Despite our long hours at work, we managed to find time to hit the gym as well as explore the beautiful landscape of Sierra Leone. Long conversations were had over freshly-cut lobster on the beach. We shared our frustrations and our excitement about our work during our morning and evening commute, taking pleasure in discovering shortcuts and putting our Landcruisers to the test on the hilly and muddy streets of Freetown.

After moving to Afghanistan in 2009, I sent a regular stream of communication to Joakim. When he left the Court at the end of 2009 to take up a post in Palestine as a legal adviser, he knew it would be a one-year contract and he began lobbying me for information as to whether UNAMA was hiring human rights officers. When he received his offer to join the Mission, Joakim had also been in the enviable position of having to decide between two competing offers. He called me to discuss what to do. Joakim only asked me two questions: one, was the work here interesting, and two, was there a decent gym. When I applied in the affirmative to both, he said his mind was made up. I knew he would want to work in the field in Afghanistan and I also knew he'd want to be in the most challenging environment. He had hoped to be placed somewhere in the south initially, and I had to convince him that he was very fortunate to be placed in Mazar and that due to the secure environment he could actually accomplish more. He grew excited in conversations with colleagues based in Kabul who had been here a long time about the challenges he would face in the north. And he was so fortunate to have a group of engaged and dynamic colleagues, both in the Human Rights section here and also in the Human Rights section in the northern region and as a whole in Mazar. I only wish that they and that we, had had more time with such a committed man.

I cannot begin to express my sadness when I discovered within one hour of his death that he was gone, he had not even completed two months in the Mission. And I am devastated that my dear friend who never failed to make me laugh or to cheer me up has left this earth. A gaping hole is now in my heart and I fear that I will not ever fill it. Joakim's commitment to protecting and defending human rights for populations in the Middle East, in Africa, in the former Yugoslavia and most recently here in Afghanistan, and his willingness to risk his own life, should never be forgotten. I will cherish the memories I have of him. I send my condolences to his family and friends all over the world, and I condemn the brutal way in which he was murdered. I will continue to work for justice and for the promotion of human rights in his name. May he rest in peace.

Staffan de Mistura: Filaret was a particularly enthusiastic colleague who had been already working with us for many years and Pavel, there you are, is the only colleague who survived. Pavel is the colleague who survived because he tried to attract attention to himself, he speaks the language, he knows the culture, and through that in a dark room they only saw him. And by

seeing him only, he was hoping – as we all did - that the other three would have survived by hiding in that dark room. It didn't happen. Someone found them later. Pavel, please come.

Pavel Ershov: Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues, Friends, Staffan, thank you very much. We should thank God who gives us life, and only God has a right to take it away. I am now overwhelmed with sadness. With feelings that almost block my throat and my breath. There are a lot of military people here who know how difficult it is to lose people you work with, you serve with, you share the time, you share everyday your work, your tasks; you argue, you laugh and you live together. These people who died were members of a team, they were committed staff members. They were working in the office on Friday doing their job, looking into the future plans of UNAMA in the northern region, preparing several very important and interesting visits that we thought would contribute to success in our region. We thought that they would contribute to strengthen peace and calm in our region.

As head of office, I lost team members and I lost good friends. Filaret was a head of the Political Unit, and I knew him as the brightest and calmest person I met in Mazar. To say more, he is my fellow college graduate and I was very proud of the fact that he was a part of my team.

We will always remember Filaret, Siri and Joakim, who were part of our team, who remain part of our team, and who will remain forever a part of our team in Mazar-e-Sharif and in the big family of the UN. Thank you.

Staffan de Mistura: Siri. Siri was the only woman in the team who died. Siri was a proud, highly popular, respected pilot of the Norwegian Airforce who had volunteered to be a liaison with the Military Advisers and therefore with both the Afghan and international forces. General.

Brigadier General Giovanni Caravelli: Ladies and Gentleman, Authorities, Staffan. Today it's my privilege to say a few words to honour Lieutenant-Colonel Siri Skare who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the service of the United Nations. Lieutenant-Colonel Siri Skare served in the Royal Norwegian Airforce, she was promoted in October 1983.

I would like to highlight some of her most notable achievements. She was the first female fighter pilot of the Royal Norwegian Airforce. She also served in P3 Orion and C-130 Hercules flying units. She had considerable staff experience in intelligence and the operational branch and achieved numerous academic, civilian and military qualifications. She served in numerous operations, the most significant of which included service in Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Israel, Kuwait and of course, Afghanistan, twice. She joined UNAMA's Military Advisory Unit last August. I would like to express our sincere condolences on the tragic loss of Siri. As an integral member of our small team, the UNAMA Military Advisory Unit, Siri was a dedicated professional who was proud of the work she was doing on behalf of the United Nations and the people of Afghanistan.

On arriving to the Mission, Siri's positive outlook, along with her open, friendly and supportive demeanour, had an immediate impact on all those with whom she worked. We are truly privileged to have served with Siri who we consider to be a true friend and comrade. We will mourn her loss but be reassured that her effort will not be in vain as we will continue her work as she would have wished us to do. Siri has sadly paid the ultimate sacrifice. Our hearts and prayers go out to Siri's family in the hope that this may in some way provide comfort in this time of great sadness.

Thank you.

Staffan de Mistura: Four of those colleagues who died were Ghurkas. They have a name, they have a face and they have a duty that they have been performing. Chitra, where is Chitra? Come closer to me please. They don't speak much. They are silent professionals. Some people call them contractors. For us they are colleagues. They've been risking their lives for us in Herat. And they've been dying with us, and for us. That's why when their bodies returned in the same plane, where our three civilian colleagues were, they were covered at my own instruction and with the permission of the Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, with the UN flag. I want to pay tribute through you, proud Gurkhas, to all those Nepalese citizens for what you've done and for the way you've been behaving. You didn't shoot at the crowd, you could have done it. You didn't use your weapons and that's why you died. The UN does not shoot at the crowd and you knew it, but you were overwhelmed at the same time together with our colleagues. Our gratitude for your courage, your dignity and for the respect of the values of the UN up to the ultimate sacrifice.

Thank you.

Chitra Bahadur Rana: Thank you.

Staffan de Mistura: Excellencies, dear friends and colleagues, I would like to terminate by referring to you a message that I got yesterday. I called the families of our colleagues, I spoke with them. And I spoke with all three. And I was particularly touched by a message I got. I spoke with the family of Joakim, and I spoke with the family of Filaret and of Siri. And the husband of Siri was sitting together with his own daughter, with their daughter, and with the mother and father of Siri. And I explained how sorry we are, how terribly devastated we are and tried to describe the last moments in order to reassure them that it was not too painful. And when I ended, the husband on behalf of the daughter of Siri, said I have a favour to ask you. So I said, of course, anything. He told me, we have discussed this before you called us, we knew you were calling, we had been alerted – and we have all decided to ask you: "Please, please, don't abandon Afghanistan."

When I spoke with the sister of Filaret yesterday, she started crying and at a certain point, she simply asked again how Filaret died. And I simply told her that just before this horrible event, he had just prepared and brought a meal for all the team, and you had a good moment before it became tragic. And then she started crying and said, "Could you, could you make sure please, on behalf of all your colleagues that he didn't die in vain."

So, I would like to dedicate our determination to stay in Afghanistan, to continue doing the work while we are reviewing of course our posture, the way we are working. But we are reviewing also the way the Afghans will support us, because as you know, sovereignty comes with responsibility and partnership, and partnership is more than words – and that is what we intend to do on both sides. And I would like to dedicate this ceremony not only to our colleagues but to all Afghans and many, many other foreigners who have been dying, even after our colleagues died. Thank you.