

Excerpts of speech of top UN Envoy to Afghanistan Kai Eide

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We had a successful London Conference last week – more so than was expected in light of the very limited time for preparations.

It marked the opening of a new phase in our relationship; a transition to greater Afghan responsibilities, which is what the Afghan government wants and what the international community wants.

I believe that 2010 will be the most challenging year since 2001 – both in military and political terms. We are in the middle of a military surge and we have the most intensive military campaign ahead of us.

President Karzai has announced a Peace Jirga sometime this spring, there will be a Kabul conference to follow-up on the conference in London, and there will be the Parliamentary elections in September.

This is, indeed, a crowded agenda – overcrowded, some may say. To manage these events in a way that makes them support and complement each other and not contradict and undermine each other will be extremely challenging.

There is a real chance of making this year a turning point, but it will require an extraordinary orchestration of political and military efforts. Let me outline a few basic ones.

The overall strategy must become more politically driven and not more militarily driven. That, in itself, is a huge challenge with an intensive military campaign just around the corner.

This campaign will take much of the attention and much of the energy of both the Afghan authorities and the international community. But we must also keep our eyes and attention firmly on the wider London agenda, with civilian institutions-building, sustainable economic growth and reconciliation/reintegration as the major components.

I am worried about a situation where our overall approach becomes even more militarily concentrated, more short-term focused, and does not give sufficient space for strengthening the political strategy and the longer-term perspective.

First, today, over 80 per cent of the projects carried out by Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have a value of under US\$ 100,000. They are mostly quick-impact projects aimed at demonstrating quick results. We have to draw the focus more towards longer-term sustainable projects and resist the temptation of accelerating further the quick-impact impulse.

Second, I am skeptical about a development where the military – out of impatience, sometimes justifiable, with the civilian components of Afghan institutions and international structures – takes on even more of the civilian tasks.

That could, in my view, lead to a strengthening of parallel international structures instead of empowering Afghan institutions. It would contradict our transition strategy and make the international community even more entrenched instead of the opposite.

And third, I would warn against further narrowing down the geographic focus of our efforts. The military campaign will focus on a small number of provinces. However, more than ever, we need a nation-wide focus if we are to implement the London strategy. The challenge will be to find the balance between the shorter-term requirements of a military campaign and the longer-term requirements of a transition strategy.

We could – if we do not get this balance right – end up in greater dependency instead of less dependency, which is the basic goal of a transition strategy.

Finally, the transition strategy must not be seen as an exit strategy. That would undermine the sustainability of the process.

So what do I see as the most pressing requirements:

First, to provide the enabling and training capacity needed for the growth of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police. Previous speakers have outlined these requirements. It is a challenge that all countries around this table can contribute to.

There is a dramatic shortfall in training capacity. Nations should, in my view, review the composition of their military engagement and see if they can redirect resources from current PRT activities into greater training capacity. Without a rapid and substantial increase in this capacity, one basic component of the transition strategy will fail. I would hope that the Europeans can play a greater role in this.

Second, the civilian institution-building programme has to be developed before the Kabul conference and must be provided with the necessary resources. Many of the tools are already in place, but such a programme will require serious funding, in the order of several hundred millions of dollars.

Third, we must – as I have already mentioned – put a brake on the quick-impact thinking. International assistance will go down. If, when it does, we have not moved forward in developing institutions that can deliver services and an economy that can fund them, then many of the projects we have implemented could collapse. That will affect education, health, and infrastructure, which are some of our success stories so far.

Fourth, it means developing nationwide programmes and looking beyond the conflict provinces, since the potential for economic growth are primarily to be found in other parts of the country.

Altogether, this will require a change of mindset, where all our efforts are focused on Afghan capacity-building, instead of capacity substitution, and on real economic growth, instead of unsustainable quick-impact, quick-collapse projects.

All these basic civilian challenges will require years of investments. It means moving away from a thinking focused on the “low hanging fruit” to an approach centred on more ambitious long-term development. This is the fundamental requirement of a transition strategy. I am convinced that a failure to adjust the way we think and operate will only lead us to another assessment one

year from now, where we will conclude that the situation has deteriorated further, and negative trends may have become unmanageable.

I emphasize the need for a nation-wide thinking also for another reason. We have seen the insurgency spreading to other parts of the country. There are several causes. However, one is the unequal distribution of financial resources, which leads to frustration and contributes to a fertile breeding ground for the insurgency in previously stable areas.

I have said before that if this trend continues, we will be faced with a situation where additional troops will be required, troops that are simply not available.

Over the last weeks, we have also seen an increased attention on reconciliation and reintegration. The reintegration fund announced in London will now be developed further and hopefully well-funded by donors. However, in my opinion, it will not work without a parallel reconciliation effort. The reintegration fund has been characterized as a “game changer.”

I believe that this could prove to be a very simplistic approach. Probably, many of the young men recruited to the insurgency are motivated by the attraction of money in the absence of employment. But many are also motivated by a combination of what they see as a weak government with a high level of corruption and a weak justice system combined with what is seen as a humiliating foreign invasion – not in the military sense, but in the sense of lack of respect for their values, culture and religion.

You can buy young men out of unemployment – at least to a certain extent. But you cannot buy young men out of the sense of humiliation, disrespect and frustration that many in Afghan society feel.

That challenge can only be met by a combination of respectful behaviour on the ground – and here I compliment General McChrystal – and a political reconciliation process.

For me, reconciliation and reintegration have to be two integral components of a wider political process. One without the other will not succeed.

Reintegration with foot soldiers alone is not sufficient. A political process is required. If not, I believe that what can be portrayed as an attempt to buy insurgents will harden other parts of the insurgency.

The Peace Jirga that President Karzai has proposed could be an important stepping stone in a reconciliation process. But it needs a broad national consensus. Is it possible? Yes, I believe so. But it requires the right signals – that we are prepared to stay as long as it takes and that we are ready for a political process.

Therefore, I also believe that in the military campaign that will soon begin, two other elements are critically important:

First, the Afghans must really be seen to be in the lead on the ground, not only symbolically but in reality.

And second – related to this – a very significant effort must be made to mobilize the local societies. Without such effective mobilisation, any “clear-hold-build” strategy will not have the necessary impact.

Finally, to come back to where I started. The calendar of events over the next eight months is the most challenging we have faced over the last nine years. It will be a decisive year. If we mobilise our resources and energy correctly, then it could be a turning point. We have to believe -- as General McChrystal said -- and be sober and realistic in our analysis.

I trust that there is sufficient collective wisdom in the international community and among Afghan leaders to seize the opportunity we have.