North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Monthly press briefing

by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen
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Good afternoon.

It’s a month since I saw you – and the last few weeks have been particularly tough in Afghanistan. I would like to express my deepest sympathy to the families and loved ones of our troops who were killed or wounded in the recent violence. These brave men were in Afghanistan to build a safer future, and any attack on our troops is an attack on the future of Afghanistan.

We condemn these crimes in the strongest possible terms. And together with the Afghan authorities, we are tightening the measures we take to prevent them.

I spoke to President Karzai last week. I encouraged him to take all necessary steps to ensure violence comes to an end and to protect ISAF personnel from attacks - and he gave me reassurances in this regard.

It is important to remember: over the past two weeks, thousands of Afghan security personnel have gone into action, at considerable risk to themselves, to prevent attacks on ISAF bases. Across the country, Afghan soldiers have risked and sacrificed their lives, to protect their ISAF partners.

So such attacks are cause for grave concern – but they do not define the relationship between ISAF and the Afghan forces. And they do not change our determination to succeed. Because we all want a safer future for Afghanistan, so that we can all be safer in our streets and in our homes. And we all know that the only way to achieve it is to work together.

At our Chicago summit in May, together with our ISAF partners, we will map out the next phase of the transition to full Afghan security responsibility between now and the end of 2014. And, as I told President Karzai during our call, we intend to make clear our enduring commitment to Afghanistan beyond 2014.

Last week, the North Atlantic Council travelled to Washington to prepare for the summit, which is less than 12 weeks away. We discussed the transformation of our Alliance: how to make sure we have the necessary capabilities for the challenges we face in the 21st century.

Nous avons déjà une base solide : le concept stratégique que nous avons adopté au sommet de Lisbonne en 2010 et qui exprime la vision de l’Alliance pour la prochaine décennie. Nous

avons bien progressé sur certains paquets de capacités critiques agréés à Lisbonne – comme le système allié de surveillance terrestre et la défense antimissile. Nous continuons à tirer les enseignements de nos opérations, comme celle menée récemment en Libye. Et nous avons un projet pour préserver et développer nos capacités, et pour combler les insuffisances qui subsistent. Parce que notre Alliance ne sera pas jugée sur ce qu'elle dit, mais sur ce qu'elle fait.

Nous devons être réalistes – nous sommes face à un paysage économique et à un paysage sécuritaire en pleine mutation. Et c'est pourquoi nous avons décidé qu'à Chicago, il nous faudra insuffler un nouvel état d'esprit : la défense intelligente.

Smart Defence is about lining up national requirements and NATO's requirements. It is about setting clear priorities. Specialising in a coordinated and deliberate way – by design, not by default. And cooperating between Allies, and with the European Union, so that every effort counts, and nothing is wasted.

I expect that in Chicago, we will make Smart Defence the new way we do business. And apply it to three strands of work: immediate projects, longer-term projects, and strategic projects .

First, an initial package of more than 20 multinational projects that will address critical capability shortfalls. We already have lead nations assigned to these projects, and we have confirmed participants.

Second, we will look at a number of longer-term multinational projects that are already in the pipeline: Missile Defence, Alliance Ground Surveillance and Air Policing. Air Policing in the Baltic States is a model for Alliance solidarity and a practical example of smart defence.

Third, we will target a number of strategic projects for 2020 and beyond. As our operation in Libya showed, we still face some specific capability gaps, such as air-to-air refuelling and joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. And we know that we will need stronger cooperation, across the Atlantic and in Europe, to fill them. So in Chicago, I will look for a commitment to make sure that this is what we deliver.

Smart Defence is about building capabilities together. But we also need to be able to operate them together. That is why I have launched the Connected Forces Initiative. It puts a premium on training and education, exercises, and better use of technology.

Our operations have given a boost to NATO's transformation. We must make sure we keep the lessons we have learned, even when those operations end. So we get where we need to be at the end of this decade and beyond. Because Chicago will mark an important chapter in this journey of transformation, but it will not be the end of the story.

Finally, I would like to comment on the good news from the Western Balkans. I welcome the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on Kosovo's representation in regional meetings.

This is a step forward. And it shows that the way forward is through dialogue.

I also welcome the European Union’s decision to award Serbia candidate status. This is a sign of progress, and a driver for progress. It is a result of reforms, and a driver of more important reforms, which can only bring benefits - to Serbia, and to the whole region. And ultimately, I would like to see the whole of the Western Balkans achieve their goal of integration into our Euro-Atlantic family.

With that, I am prepared to take your questions.

Q: Denis Dubrovin, ITAR-TASS News Agency. Mister Secretary General, we just had elections in Russia. So I would like to ask you if you have any comments to make on these elections. And if a change in leadership in Russia will affect in any way the cooperation between NATO and Russia. And my second question is on Libya. The International UN Commission has just published its report on the violations of human rights in Libya. It's a balanced document, stressed on the violations of human rights by Qaddafi forces, opposition forces and the real effects of the collateral losses due to NATO air strikes. So there is also a demand for the investigation from NATO side of these facts. Is NATO aware of this report? And are there any plans to have such an investigation? Thank you very much.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: Thank you, first on the presidential elections in Russia. The results of the elections are not yet final. But I have noted the preliminary results. And I also note the concerns voiced by the OSCE and Council of Europe election monitors.

From what I have seen from initial reports, the outcome is likely to be continuity in Russia's leadership and Russia's policies. And I would expect that continuity to include a continued engagement in positive dialogue and cooperation as we agreed at the NATO-Russia Summit in Lisbon in November 2010.

And since our Summit in Lisbon, we have made important progress in important areas. We have enhanced cooperation on Afghanistan, on counter-terrorism, on counter-narcotics, on counter-piracy. And I hope that we will now be able to move forward in other areas, especially on missile defence. I think both Russia and NATO would benefit from such cooperation. In Lisbon, we decided to develop true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia and I hope to see progress in that respect.

Now, on Libya, yes, I'm aware of the report from the International Commission on Libya. As far as the concrete figures are concerned, I don't have any comments; because I'm not able to verify these figures. But I welcome the Commission's conclusion that NATO... Now I quote from the Commission report, that "NATO conducted a highly precise campaign with a demonstrable determination to avoid civilian casualties"; and that the Commission also recognized NATO's objective to take all necessary precautions to avoid civilian casualties entirely.

And based on the report from this independent commission I can also clearly state that NATO was not in breach of international law in the way we conducted the operation in Libya. We conducted operations in Libya in full accordance with the United Nations mandate and within international law. Of course, in a complex military campaign, the risk to civilians can never be zero. But we did everything to minimize it.

Oana Lungescu: ANSA.

Q: It's a follow-up about Russia. Are you not concerned about all the problems about the rearmament that Putin made during his electoral campaign? And what about the NATO-Russia Summit? Could it be held in Chicago definitely or not? Thanks.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: Well, as a politician I'm used to hearing many things during election campaigns. What... what counts is... the concrete steps that are taken once the electorate has made its decision. And as I stated in my previous answer, I would expect... I would expect continued progress in the cooperation between NATO and Russia. Obviously, we do not agree on everything. We have our disputes. We have our differences. But those differences should not overshadow the fact that in many areas we do share security concerns because we are faced with the same security challenges. This is the reason why we should cooperate also on missile defence.

And the second part of your question was...?

Oana Lungescu: The Summit... (inaudible).

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: Sorry, sorry, yes. As far as a NATO-Russia summit in Chicago is concerned, I think it's premature to make any assessment. I think we'll have a NATO-Russia meeting if we can reach an agreement on missile defence. If we can't there won't be any meeting. It is as simple as that. So maybe there won't be a meeting. But as I said in another context, Chicago will not be the end of the story. We will continue talks, negotiations with Russia also beyond our meeting in Chicago.

Oana Lungescu: Georgian Media.

Q: Same question. Putin is going to become the president. So everyone knows his position about further expansion of NATO. He's against to expand NATO near his borders, near Russia's borders. So will his... the statements some kind influence further expansion of NATO?

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: No third country... no third party can make decisions on behalf of NATO. NATO decides on our open-door policy. And NATO's door remains open. And that will be reiterated in Chicago. NATO's door remains open to European countries that are in a position to contribute to the security in the North Atlantic region and countries that are in a position to further the principles on which NATO is based. This is clearly stated in Article 10 of our Treaty. And that still stands. So it's for NATO to decide on the open-door policy. As far as

Georgia is concerned, we all... I would like to recall the decision we took in Bucharest in 2008, at the NATO Summit in 2008 according to which Georgia will become a member of NATO, of course provided that Georgia fulfils all necessary criteria and that we cooperate with Georgia within the NATO-Georgia Commission to make progress in that direction.

Oana Lungescu: Financial Times.

Q: Thank you, Sir. Peter Spiegel from the Financial Times. If I can get back to the opening question about the Libya report, because it is not completely complimentary to NATO's conduct. Just to read one section "NATO's characterization of four or five targets where Commission found civilian casualties as command and control nodes or troop-staging areas is not reflective of the evidence at the scene or witness testimony." It basically argues that given the information provided by NATO it does not know whether the civilian deaths occur because there were legitimate military targets. Do you anticipate that NATO will follow up and provide the Commission with the information that it is seeking to determine whether those were legitimate military targets are not? Thank you, Sir.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: Let me stress that we have fully cooperated with the Commission. We provided them a significant amount of information, much of which has also had to be declassified. And you can read the reports we sent to the Commission, because you can see them in the annexes to the report. And the Commission concluded that we conducted a highly precise campaign with a demonstrable determination to avoid civilian casualties.

As far as NATO is concerned, I can also tell that we have looked into every allegation of harm to civilians of which has been brought to our attention. This has involved a thorough assessment of all NATO's records from target selection to any other data gathered after the strike.

This review process has confirmed that the targets we struck were legitimate military targets selected consistently with the United Nations mandate and that great care was taken in each case to minimize risk to civilians. I can tell you that no target was approved or attacked if we had any evidence or reason to believe that civilians were at risk. I can also inform you that hundreds of possible targets were passed up and others were aborted at the last minute to avoid any risk to civilians. So we have really done everything we could.

Oana Lungescu: Associated Press.

Q: Secretary General, you've addressed the issue of Syria several times in the past. And you said NATO was not planning to get involved. Do you have any other comments on that today?

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: The bottom-line is the same as it has been all the time. But obviously we all follow the situation closely. And it's absolutely outrageous what we are witnessing. I strongly condemn the crackdowns on the civilian population in Syria. And I urge

the leadership in Syria to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people; introduce freedom and democracy. In the long run, no regime can neglect the will of the people. Neither in Syria; nor in any other country.

Oana Lungescu: KUNA.

Q: Nawab Khan from the Kuwait News Agency. Mister Secretary General, my question has to do with the burning of the Holy Quran incident recently in Afghanistan. It has not only indignated the Afghani people; but the whole Muslim world. But what steps are you proposing to take to avoid such incidents in the future? Thank you.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: This is a very unfortunate incident. I can also clearly state that the preliminary results of the investigations that have been initiated reveal that this incident was unintentional. The facts show that there was no malicious intent to mishandle religious material and our commanders in Afghanistan will make decisions about the appropriate next steps also to avoid such incidents in the future.

Having said that, let me also stress that what has happened will not in any way change our strategy and our way forward, the transition to lead Afghan responsibility for the security will continue according to the timetable we outlined at our summit in Lisbon in November 2010. Transition is on track and we will also reaffirm our enduring partnership with Afghanistan.

Oana Lungescu: Defence News.

Q: Secretary General, on the Connected Forces Initiative, could you give more details on the new training and education activities you have in mind? I noticed that in your Munich speech, you also mentioned opening up the extensive range of national facilities. Could you elaborate a bit on what you meant by that? And the second question, are there any specific new technology interoperability initiatives that are planned as well?

Anders Fogh Rasmussen: Thank you. I think it's a bit premature to go into further details at this stage. I've launched the initiative. We are now working on this initiative to make it an integrated part of a defence package to be adopted at the summit in Chicago. I see it also in the context of Smart Defence. Smart Defence is about acquiring capabilities. The Connected Forces Initiative is about making these capabilities work more closely and more efficiently together. In broad terms, the Connected Forces Initiative is about stepping up our training and educational activities. It's about reinforcing the NATO Response Force. And that's a very important part of this, the more because the United States has decided to invest more in the NATO Response Force. The NATO Response Force is an excellent lever for connecting European Forces and North American Forces. And the final strand of work will focus on technology in particular, how common standards can improve connectivity across the Atlantic; but also in more technical terms how we can use what is called adaptors to make sure that different weapon systems can work more efficiently together. That's what I can tell you about

it at this stage. We are now working on a more detailed plan to be integrated in the defence package to be adopted in Chicago.

Oana Lungescu: Thank you very much. I'm afraid that's all we have time for today, thanks.

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