

Press Conference

PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)

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Kabul – 27 November 2010

Yury Fedotov: Good morning. Sorry for being late—the traffic in Kabul is comparable to the traffic in major capitals of the world. I should introduce myself: my name is Yury Fedotov and I am the head of UNODC. I have been appointed to this position only two months ago.

Afghanistan continues to be the highest priority for the international community and so is it for UNODC. Before coming to Kabul I took part in the triangular initiative ministerial conference in Islamabad. It's an important initiative which was established a few years ago with strong support from UNODC. I hope this initiative will help to promote meaningful cooperation between countries in the region to fight against drug trafficking

I have already met officials from the Government of Afghanistan and I look forward to meeting with President Karzai in two hours. Although Afghanistan faces many difficult challenges, it is the part of the solution of illicit drug trafficking.

You are familiar with the recent opium survey issued by UNODC a month ago. As you know the major conclusions of this Report are that the production of opium declined by almost 50 per cent because of the plant disease. But, unfortunately, the cultivation areas are the same. But there is another important conclusion of this Report, which is that in the majority of the provinces of Afghanistan, where there is strong governance and rule of law, there is no poppy cultivation and that poppy cultivation is concentrated only in five provinces, which are also the provinces of instability, insecurity and fighting.

Afghanistan's efforts to increase security and reduce opium cultivation are to be commended and expanded. To tackle the problem of Afghan opium and insecurity, we need to develop a comprehensive strategy and this strategy should be international.

The international community must continue to encourage the Afghan Government to take measures that increase security to the extent to which Afghanistan can extend the rule of law and can increase the number of poppy-free provinces. Ultimately drugs trafficking are another form of international organised crime which is always accompanied by other forms of illicit trafficking, such as illicit trafficking of arms, human beings, corruption and money laundering. I had a very useful meeting with the director-general of the Oversight Office and we agreed that UNODC will continue to support and assist other agencies in Afghanistan and to fight against corruption.

We also need a broader strategy to provide farmers throughout Afghanistan with access to markets and a secure environment. We need to give farmers a chance to support their families without resorting to opium poppy cultivation. Crop eradication can also play a role. It is one of the several tools. Crop eradication is a national responsibility. UNODC recommends crop eradication should be a part of an overall strategy and we will continue to do that. And, of course, we should not forget the consumer side of opium...that equation is important.

Demand reduction must continue to be an important part of this comprehensive strategy. In many countries, injecting drug users are also contributing to the rapid spread of HIV AIDS and, unfortunately, Afghanistan is not an exception. I visited one of the centres of rehabilitation of drug users in Kabul and I was impressed by the quality of services that the patients are receiving from the staff of this centre and this centre is supported by UNODC.

Yesterday, I also had a chance to visit a women's prison in Kabul that is a kind of a model prison where the standards of human rights are being observed. I think that sets the example not only for Afghanistan and its provinces, but also this experience can be followed by other countries.

UNODC programmes in Afghan are supported by our donors. And we will continue to work with all countries who want to help Afghanistan and who want to help us to help Afghanistan. Addressing Afghanistan's opium problems in conjunction with other related problems of organised crimes and corruption and insecurity will help the entire region. What we are doing has a broader impact on international stability. This is what we call shared responsibility. International cooperation is the only effective solution to the Afghan drug problem and its international impact.

I want to now pause and take your questions, if you have any.

Questions and Answers:

Azadi Radio [translation from Dari]: From your speeches, we know there needs to be an alternative for the farmers so they don't cultivate opium and drugs. Also, as we know in Afghanistan, there are more than a million drug addicts now. What's your new commitment and your solutions and strategy to treat them?

Fedotov: Yes, of course, there is a need to have an alternative for the farmers, to discourage them to grow poppy, to encourage them to grow other crops, and to support their families. It needs to be done. And now this is a crucial moment. It needs to be done as soon as possible. Especially, as you know, the decline in opium reduction would impact on the prices and the hike of prices on opium would stimulate farmers to grow more. That's why we need to act fast and to suggest to them to grow some alternative crops.

It is different from place to place and from province to province. In some cases, there may be some other occupations rather than farming, but it should be a good sound legal alternative to the farmers and UNODC will continue to support the efforts of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in this direction.

As far as the second part of your question is concerned, I strongly advise you to visit the rehabilitation centre in Kabul. You will see for yourself how it is being done, how humanely and professionally the drug addicts are treated. There is a whole system based on medical

prescriptions...it takes up to two months. But after the two months, most of the patients of this centre completely recover. I think it is one of the best achievements we have. We need to spread this experience beyond Kabul to other parts and places of Afghanistan and we have to do it more actively. UNODC is committed to supporting the efforts of this direction.

Channel One [translated from Dari]: We've heard from the minister of counter narcotics, who was saying that the concern he has is that the global community is not so interested in the fight against narcotics and we don't have very much cooperation from the global community. This was the major concern of the Minister. As he said, in some areas, cultivation has decreased, but prices have gone up. What do you think about this?

Fedotov: The second part of the question is very legitimate. As I said, not the cultivation but the production of opium decreased by half this year, to be precise, by 48 percent. Twenty provinces of Afghanistan may be considered as poppy-free. Four provinces are close to being poppy-free. And the bulk of the opium is produced, cultivated and manufactured in five provinces.

The international community is supporting the Government of Afghanistan. But, of course, the international community cannot do it by itself without the active involvement of the Government of Afghanistan. As head of UNODC, I will continue to insist and to work with the donor community so that we can give even more support, even more contribution to the Government of Afghanistan. But so far we do have sufficient funding for the financial basis of our operations in Afghanistan from our donors.

Recently I had contacts with some of the Governments and they expressed commitment that they will continue to support the entire anti-narcotics policy in Afghanistan. They are doing that out of solidarity for the people of Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan suffered a lot and the people of Afghanistan need international support. But they are doing that also because of their own interest, as the problem of Afghan opium is a trans-national and a trans-border problem. It is cultivated and manufactured here in Afghanistan, but it ends up in countries thousands of miles away and even in different continents. That's why the Governments who are helping us here, who are helping you, are helping themselves.

BBC English: You talked about a new initiative between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. But we have seen so many times criticism from Afghan officials regarding cooperation with regional countries. How do you assess the cooperation between Afghanistan and the neighboring countries? Are they cooperating enough with the Afghan Government to tackle this issue?

Fedotov: In spite all these problems, sensitivities and relations with neighboring countries, the development of the triangle initiative was very positive. There are many reasons to believe that the last meeting in Islamabad was very important from the point of view it will open the way in a more meaningful and practical cooperation.

Counter narcotics ministers from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran adopted a declaration, but also they adopted an action plan of 21 points. And this plan contains specific areas of cooperation on areas such as intelligence sharing, joint operations and coordination. And they started to plan and to conduct some of these operations jointly.

A coordination office has been opened in Tehran. The decision was taken some time ago but only recently Afghanistan and Pakistan appointed liaison officers to Tehran to work together very closely. That is another testimony that this calculation is going from strength to strength. UNODC will continue to support this initiative within the framework of its rainbow strategy and

will encourage other countries in this region to come closer together and to extend this sub-regional and regional calculation.

Negah TV [translated from Dari]: You said that you were appointed recently to this position, but we have heard from other heads of UNODC...they were also promising to provide alternatives for the farmers, so as to encourage them not to cultivate opium. Have you thought about other alternatives for the farmers, such as saffron? As we know, farmers have not received the proper help promised. Also, in Afghanistan, there are more than one million addicts. According to reports, the Government can treat only one per cent of those drug addicts. Is there any programme or strategy to treat those drug addicts?

Fedotov: That is the policy of UNODC. That is the policy of the international community. That is, of course, also the issue of quality of life.

And it takes time, it may take time. You cannot change the situation overnight. It's also the issue of mentality. We need to change people's mentality. But as the new executive director of UNODC, I will surely try to do more...so more help is provided to farmers, more incentives, including cash incentives are provided to them to grow alternative crops.

Lemahieu: Just to elaborate on what Mr Fedotov mentioned. It's a step-by-step process. In the past, we have put a lot of emphasis on the Holy Grail – the cash crops. Is it saffron, is it wheat, or is it another cash crop? And that is not a bad discussion. It is something that we need to induce at this moment.

We all know that development by itself takes time. Rural development takes time. Creating new income takes time. So that is the first step. The first step is one of quality of life, none of these are determined only by income. Our quality of life is determined by many issues. Can our kids go to school? Do they have access to medical care? Do they have real security? So all that determines the baskets of life, of what we are. So we have now introduced a few pilot projects in Herat: I mean very small ones, together with farmers, and the NGOs, where we are hoping to demonstrate this formula of putting the emphasis on the quality of life, knowing that the income issue is something which might take more time before that gets put together. But there are issues that can be tackled immediately. So it is a more comprehensive approach.

Bakhtar [translated from Dari]: You concluded that farmers are cultivating opium in only five provinces of Afghanistan...the others are opium-free or about to be opium-free. According to the report, it says that in 120,000 hectares of Afghanistan, this opium is cultivated? The second question is, for production of drugs or heroin in Afghanistan, materials and chemicals are exported from out of Afghanistan to produce drugs here. How are they doing this? And according to the report, Afghanistan is the biggest country which produces drugs. At what level is Afghanistan now?

Fedotov: Yes, Afghanistan is the largest producer of drugs and narcotics. That is unfortunately true. As far as provinces are concerned, indeed the concentration of cultivation and production is in five provinces. And Helmand province takes the lead. Helmand produces 53 per cent of opium. That is also true. As far as the opium-free provinces are concerned, they are free from cultivation of poppy or almost free. But, of course, we cannot consider them as free from illicit drug trafficking or even production. We don't know. But it is important that poppy is not cultivated. That is a great achievement.

Afghanistan Times [translated from Dari]: For the production of drugs, some chemicals and materials are exported from outside the country. In order to prevent this import, are there any plans?

Fedotov: Yes, of course, there are plans. By the way, this is another issue discussed within the framework of the triangular initiative. Also, our rainbow strategy contains very important elements which are specifically targeted towards prevention of the illicit trafficking of precursors and supplying of precursors to Afghanistan. We have not achieved a result (yet) and there is still a continued supply of precursors to Afghanistan, but that is a matter that is taken seriously by UNODC and we hope the regional countries will help to establish more effective and efficient calculations to prevent this illegal activity.

I want to thank you for your questions and I wish you the best.

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