

Report from the meeting of the interested Swedish parties in Afghanistan

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Alarm bells are ringing in Western capitals regarding the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. A resurgent and more aggressive Taliban, record high opium production, along with a weak, impotent, incompetent, corrupt and increasingly isolated government in Kabul have once again brought Afghanistan on the brink. Meetings, discussions and major policy reviews are under way among NATO member states and other actors involved on the Afghan scene in order to reverse and avoid a Western failure in Afghanistan, which could have unprecedented consequences for regional and international stability.

On Friday, September 26, 2008 a meeting of the interested Swedish parties in Afghanistan was held at the Swedish Foreign Ministry in Stockholm. The meeting, which was chaired by the heads of the South Asia and Afghanistan desks at the Foreign Ministry, was attended by representatives from major Swedish governmental institutions as well as Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA); Swedish Red Cross; Save the Children Sweden; Swedish Church's Mission; Swedish Rescue Services Agency (SRSA); Hand in Hand Afghanistan Organization (HiHAO); Forum Syd; Swedfund; Swedish Army; Justice Department; Swedish Embassy in Kabul, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET). Except the representatives from OverHorizon, surprisingly, there were no other interested parties from the Swedish commerce, trade and industry. Neither there were any representatives from the private sector, potential investors or the Afghan refugee community in Sweden.

A 21 pages Swedish government document titled "*Cooperation strategy for development collaboration with Afghanistan*", which outlines the Swedish government's policies in regards to Afghanistan for the strategy period of 2006 – 2008, was presented as the foundation for further discussions at the meeting and thereafter. According to the document, the aim of Swedish development collaboration with Afghanistan is to create prerequisites and opportunities for the poor and needy people to improve their living conditions. While the total amount of Swedish aid to Afghanistan during the strategy period has been between SEK 900-1200 millions, of which 90 millions are channeled through SCA, and concentrated in three Northern provinces of Afghanistan, following areas have been prioritized in the development collaboration with Afghanistan:

1. To strengthen Afghanistan's abilities to reduce poverty in the long term and in a sustainable way
2. To develop and strengthen conditions for democracy, rule of law and respect for the human rights, including consolidation of women's position in the society
3. To contribute in the development of civil society
4. To contribute in the strengthening of the internal and external security

It is expected that Sweden will continue to support the rehabilitation and (re)construction of Afghanistan during the upcoming strategy period, which is to be endorsed by the Swedish government later this month, at the same time as the humanitarian aid will cease in favor of more long term development collaboration. The document recommends that Sweden should gradually concentrate her aid efforts to a few limited sectors, provided that there are continued improvements in the security situation of Afghanistan. It states that Swedish government should assign Sida to come up with proposals, in the middle of the upcoming strategy period, for guidance in this regard. During the strategy period a fundamental analyses of the events in the country and continued Swedish development cooperation should be carried out.

It should be noted that Sweden is one the smaller contributing donors in Afghanistan compared to other Western nations involved in the rebuilding of Afghanistan, which figures second after Africa in the five categories of Swedish global aid priorities. There are 375 personnel from the Swedish armed forces present in Afghanistan.

Most of the participants, with more or less deep knowledge and long experience, who were either reporting directly from the field or have been visiting Afghanistan recently, expressed deep concern regarding the deteriorating security situation in the country, which is making it very difficult and risky for the aid workers to reach their aid targets in the rural areas. Even the provinces and areas surrounding Kabul are almost inaccessible for the aid workers, not to mention South and North East Afghanistan. They underlined that military efforts alone can not and will not bring peace, stability and development to Afghanistan and urged all parties involved in Afghanistan to raise their stakes and dramatically increase civilian aid to the country, and that there should be a clear balance between civilian and military spending.

The "Afghanization" of the reconstruction process was another issue that the participants insisted up on. They pointed out that Afghans themselves must gradually take the lead in the reconstruction of their country and ultimately the entire process should be handed over to them as soon as possible. Support to the education and health sectors must increase significantly and Sweden should take the lead to help Afghanistan eliminate illiteracy once and for all. More effective and less geographical steering of aid distribution and expansion of aid to other sectors that demonstrates Sweden has the interest and willingness to help in other areas; developing more small businesses with the help of microfinance were other points raised at the meeting.

Participants expressed serious concerns about the plight of women, youth and children in Afghanistan who are increasingly facing more violence, physical as well as socio-psychological, and that there should be more programs for their rehabilitation and protection. Avoiding youth unemployment; strengthening peace, security, prosperity and the civil society; more national and flexible programs for allocation of aid; strengthening Afghanistan's capabilities for emergency situations; more support and guidance to national security forces and law enforcements agencies; more aggressively combating poverty, unemployment, corruption and nepotism were some of the demands from the participants.

Although there have been some great and important achievements in Afghanistan during the past seven years, a lot more needs to be done in order to secure the future and prevent the country from falling back to its old habits. The achievements, some of them very significant, are very fragile and only a long term commitment to

the rebuilding of the country can ensure a lasting success, according to the participants.

Suggestions, proposals and ideas regarding the upcoming strategy period are welcome to be submitted to the Swedish Foreign Ministry's Afghanistan Desk or Sida.

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