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Transcript of Remarks and Replies to Media Questions by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Following International Conference on Afghanistan and Meeting of the Contact Group on Kosovo, London, January 31, 2006

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Foreign Minister Lavrov: The main session of the International Conference on Afghanistan took place in London today. Over half a hundred states and international organizations attended it. The conference considered the question of drawing up a new agenda of the world community in support of the stabilization and democratization of Afghanistan and its conversion into a stable country that from now on will not be a hotbed of terrorism and will be in a position to curb the narco-threat emanating from its territory, which is very serious and directly affects Russia, our European neighbors and is also being felt across the Atlantic.

A voluminous document was agreed upon, encompassing every area of the endeavor, both of the Afghan leadership and society and of the international community participating in the country's reconstruction. It is called the Afghanistan Compact. The document was today officially signed. As I have already said, it envisages a program of further actions and encompasses the economic and social rehabilitation of the country, and steps for eradicating drug production and drug trafficking from the territory of Afghanistan, which I hope will be more effective than they were in the past. Here, undoubtedly, efforts are required to replace narco crops with other crops, but measures by law enforcement agencies are equally important. We expect that, apart from the Afghans, who should more actively engage in fighting this evil, the international structures present in Afghanistan will also be involved in this work.

It is also about external assistance. Russia over the period of the now-expired Bonn support program for Afghanistan rendered 30 million dollar-worth of humanitarian assistance to that country and more than 200 million dollar-worth of assistance helping form security structures, primarily the Afghan army. We shall continue our cooperation with Afghanistan in the future as well. We have quite a few projects accomplished there from previous times, which the Afghans would like to continue using in the interests of a peaceful life. This concerns educational institutions, schools, hospitals, industrial plants. Of course, so far the security situation in Afghanistan is far from ideal, but as the new structures take shape, especially after a parliament is at last formed, we expect that there will be progress in this field.

Today Afghan President Hamid Karzai in conversation with me reaffirmed his agreements with Russian President Vladimir Putin that all of Afghanistan is open for Russian entrepreneurs and organizations and that the Afghan leadership will be actively encouraging our cooperation in the economic, social and trade fields.

The problem of Afghan indebtedness also was discussed. There are several major country creditors to Afghanistan, among them Russia. We are ready to consider this problem within the Paris Club framework. Afghanistan has agreed to having it discussed there. We shall act in accordance with the conditions which are accepted in this club as well as, of course, with due regard for our own legislation. We shall also take into account the opportunities which are opening up in the Afghan market for Russian companies.

Question: What can you say following the session of the Contact Group on Kosovo?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: During today's meeting of the Contact Group at ministers' level there was approved a document, the Joint Statement, which reaffirms the necessity, as part of the process of the talks to determine Kosovo's status that has begun, to be guided above all by the extent to which the tasks set by the UN Security Council and the Contact Group itself, to establish order in the province and normalize conditions there in terms of security, national minority rights, freedom of their movement, and the protection of religious and cultural monuments of the minorities, are being tackled. All these questions, which it is customary to call standards, ought to be dealt with as a matter of priority, and the status talks should not have any artificial time limits. Our partners are for endeavoring to conclude them within 2006. Trying is, of course, possible, but what matters most is not an artificial timeframe, but the quality of life, which in Kosovo needs to be ensured not only for the Albanian majority, but also for all, for the Serbs and other minorities. During the work on this statement, our western colleagues wanted to write down a thesis that the Kosovo settlement would not create a precedent for other conflict situations in different regions. We did not agree to that and, as a result, such a position is not contained in the document.

Question: Will it be hard for our diplomats to conduct talks with the Hamas movement, considering today's statement by its leaders who called yesterday's Quartet communique international blackmail?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: I do not think that this statement corresponds to the sentiments which prevail among the Palestinian people. The Quartet's statement has reaffirmed a major principle in the conduct of international affairs, namely that of continuity. The PNA leadership has concluded specific agreements with Israel over recent years. We are for their being implemented by both sides. The most important document is, of course, the Roadmap for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement and there is simply no alternative to it, both by the acknowledgement of the entire Arab world and of the Quartet of mediators.

When Hamas was elected into parliament, when it got a majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council, the Quartet promptly came up with a response, welcomed the results of democratic, truly free and secure elections and underscored three elements. The parliamentarians must, of course, be people who renounce violence as a means of solving political problems. They must act within the framework of the very same continuity, without which it is impossible to conduct international affairs and resolve conflicts, and must recognize Israel as the state with which it is necessary to agree on the implementation of the

task which has been set by the UN, namely that of moving towards the moment when two independent states, Palestine and Israel, will coexist side by side.

Undoubtedly, the principles which underlie any political activities must be respected. We do not reject engagement with the new Palestinian leaders, both with the parliament and with the government which this parliament will form. It is quite likely that this will be a coalition government. But it's quite possible that the government will consist entirely of Hamas representatives. Russia has no prejudices regarding the conduct of affairs with the Palestinians under the new leaders and government either, but I am convinced that the persons who have got the recognition of their people, who won the elections, should certainly be aware of their responsibility for a political settlement which is in the vital interests of the Palestinians, in the vital interests of the entire Middle East.

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