

International Conference on the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees  
to support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration  
and Assistance to Host Countries

**Keynote Speech**  
**By Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi**

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Federal Councilor Burkhalter,  
High Commissioner,  
Excellences,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply grateful to you, High Commissioner, for inviting me to this very important and very timely Conference. It is an honour indeed and such a pleasure to see familiar faces from the past and to know that, in this distinguished audience, many have, at one point or another, participated in the collective effort to support the people of Afghanistan as they courageously struggle to restore peace and bring stability and development to their country and dignity to their people.

I left Afghanistan more than eight years ago and the United Nations two years later. But does one really leave either Afghanistan or the United Nations?

When I was still in both, I used to tell people that the UN and Afghanistan had at least one thing in common – *tribalism*. And that I was not sure which, of the two, was the more tribal.

But let me hasten to add that UNHCR has been, and continues to be, one of my favourite United Nations Tribes. I have long admired the creativity of their leadership, the dedication and professionalism of staff, and the manner in which in these days of financial crunch, they strive to do more with less, as they work, round the clock and around the world, to provide for the needs of millions of people.

In conflict situations, UNHCR people are often the first to arrive and the last to leave, if they do leave at all. With Afghan refugees, they have been engaged now for well over 30 years. And naturally, Pakistan and Iran were, and continue to be, close partners on that job as those two countries hosted the overwhelming majority of Afghan refugees and continue to do so.

Today, you have gathered here to address that long-standing and multi-faceted humanitarian problem of the Afghan refugees and returnees who account, I believe for roughly a quarter of the total population of Afghanistan.

Allow me, at this stage, to warmly congratulate the Governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan for coming together in this project to work closely with UNHCR on the Afghan refugee problem and all the many related issues. And allow me also, to express my appreciation, my admiration and my congratulations to High Commissioner Guterres and his colleagues in UNHCR for their initiative and their successful facilitation of the process.

But of course the hard, patient work lies ahead: for this undertaking to be successful, the four partners need the sustained attention and support of all of you present in this conference.

I served twice in Afghanistan: from July 1997 to October 1999 as Special Envoy of the Secretary General of the United Nations and again, immediately after 9/11 2001 till January 2004 as Special Representative of the Secretary General, Chair of the Bonn Conference and Head of the UNAMA – the United Nations Assistant Mission in Afghanistan.

When dealing with such a complex situation as the one prevailing in Afghanistan, it is necessary to be fully aware of the past, to have an accurate knowledge of the present and to develop a vision of the future which is both realistic and ambitious.

All I can contribute to your deliberations at this Conference is to share with you a few thoughts about my experience during those two missions and tell you of a few lessons I learned from our successes and failures during that time.

During my first mission in Afghanistan, it was particularly distressing to see that those millions of refugees, mainly in Pakistan and Iran had no prospect of returning home. On the contrary, each time the fighting intensified in their country, or the crops failed, more came across the border to increase their numbers.

The peoples and Governments of Pakistan and Iran cannot be thanked enough for their admirable sense of neighborly solidarity, their brotherly and generous hospitality, and all the sacrifices they made and continue to make to support the Afghan refugees on their soil and also to help, to the best of their ability, in the orderly and voluntary return of those refugees who wish to go back home again.

The specific needs of the Afghan Refugees and the unique role of Pakistan and Iran, as well as the other neighbours of Afghanistan were recognized time and again – the latest time being in the Communique of the Conference which was held in Bonn, in December 2001 to commemorate the tenth Anniversary of the Bonn Conference of 2001. Here is the paragraph devoted to the Refugees in that Communique: *“We acknowledge the burden of Afghanistan’s neighbours, in particular Pakistan and Iran, in providing temporary refuge to millions of Afghans in difficult times and are committed to further work towards their voluntary, safe and orderly return”*.

This commitment is fully consistent with the letter and spirit of the Agenda for Protection of 2002 if I remember well and the Convention Plus which speak, inter alia, of the need for the international community to share the burden of providing for the needs of refugees and IDPs and the host communities as fairly as possible. In this connection, I wish to recognize the patient and generous interest of many international donors who stayed on and helped the Afghan refugees during those challenging years.

As many in this distinguished audience will no doubt recall, the decade of the 90s was particularly difficult. I remember the visit Mrs. Sadako Ogata – a familiar name to many of you – made to Afghanistan in 2000, just before she left her position as High Commissioner. She saw from very close quarters how things were at a standstill politically and how, as she told me then, the world seemed to have forgotten about Afghanistan.

Of course, I knew very well, from my own experience what Mrs. Ogata meant: for two long years I had spoken again and again to every faction inside Afghanistan and to every Government in

every country where I thought there was some interest for Afghanistan. But we got nowhere. We kept going around in circles, the fighting continued and the people of Afghanistan were held hostage to those groups whose interest seemed to be in the continuation of the conflict, not in its solution.

The sad truth is that the international community did not consider then that Afghanistan was of much interest and that the world could live with what was described as *a low intensity conflict* in a remote, land-locked, poor country like Afghanistan.

In September 1999, I resigned and told a closed meeting of the Security Council that I was giving up because I felt I had no real support from them: I had the clear impression that the most influential members of the Council thought that now that the Cold War was over, Afghanistan was of no importance to them. I added that they were wrong however, because no conflict could be bottled up for ever within the borders of one country, no matter how small, no matter how poor and no matter how remote that country was. And that, sooner or later, that conflict was bound to spill over and affect many other countries and peoples.

Actually, the conflict in Afghanistan had already spilled over with the millions of refugees, mainly in Pakistan and Iran, but also in many other countries, from India to Germany and from Australia to Sweden.

Equally serious was the opium trade which was destroying the health of millions of young people around the world and criminalizing the economy of Afghanistan itself as well as that of many other countries. Remember, already in those days, somewhere around 75% of the hard drugs sold on the high streets of London or Berlin came from Afghanistan.

And need we recall how, neglecting Afghanistan the way it had been throughout the nineties ended up being even more costly with the attacks in New York and Washington on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001.

Of course, interest for Afghanistan immediately rose sky-high after 9/11. As we were preparing for the Bonn Conference immediately after those unprecedented attacks, I asked almost every one of the important players this simple and direct question: 9/11 is the direct consequence of the way in which the international community turned its back on Afghanistan after the Soviet Union withdrew from the country in 1989. Are you going to turn your back again on Afghanistan?

The answers I got from everyone seemed to indicate that the lesson had been learnt: the world shall not abandon Afghanistan again, I was assured.

Just under one year later, Sadako Ogata came to Kabul again, this time as the head of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). I accompanied her to Kandahar and one of the places we visited was a large camp for internally displaced people. It was particularly embarrassing for both of us to see that some of the millions of refugees who had enthusiastically returned from their refugee camps abroad could not reach their villages. Nor were they resettled elsewhere: the sad truth was that – yes – fighting had stopped but real peace and stability had not returned to the villages of those particular refugees who found themselves stranded in that IDP Camp.: their houses, their farms or their shops had been occupied by others during their absence and they had nowhere to go back to. Other returning refugees facing similar problems were not in IDP camps but in shantytowns that had mushroomed around Kabul and other Afghan cities.

UNHCR was supporting them with their usual dedication and courage. But what was needed to effectively help the returnees to be successfully reintegrated in their society could not be achieved by UNHCR alone. It was a shared responsibility of all those who had been given a role in the implementation of the Bonn process in the fields of security, governance and development – i.e. the Government of Afghanistan and all their partners who had agreed to work with them in the field of security, governance, and development.

Much has been achieved by the Afghan people and Government and their international partners. But they failed. **WE** failed in the important field of security and in the equally important field of institution building, especially the **Rule of Law**.

I have spoken publicly and frankly of the mistakes we all made in the process and will do so again, today, if I may – very briefly:

- 1) Those who met in Bonn in November/December 2001 were not fully representative of the rich variety of the people of Afghanistan. They, and us, were fully aware of that from the start and we thought all concerned would work to widen the popular base of the Bonn process as soon as we returned to Kabul. Our attempts were not inclusive enough and they were not successful. In particular, no serious effort was made to reach out to the Taliban.
- 2) It was necessary and possible to expand the field of activity of ISAF to cities other than Kabul. For that, ISAF needed to increase its strength from the 5000 men they started with to some 20,000. But that request fell on deaf ears.
- 3) The attention of key partners soon shifted away from Afghanistan to another country – Iraq.
- 4) Efforts to develop a credible and effective anti-drug policy were not successful – and still are not, I believe.
- 5) Corruption was allowed to take root and become the fast growing cancer it is today, partly fueled by large donations without due consideration to the need to help build administrative capacity and partly, it seems, by the huge drug industry.
- 6) Efforts to build a national Army and a Police Force were totally inadequate for many years.
- 7) The problems of the Justice System were first neglected and then poorly understood and addressed.

I think all these issues have been and are being addressed as may be seen, in particular, in the Final Communique of the Bonn Conference I quoted from a moment ago.

But the International Community was particularly slow to reach a consensus on the need and urgency of political negotiations to put an end to the various insurgencies. Even now, in many centres of influence, inside and outside of Afghanistan, there are voices who express doubts about the desirability of such a negotiation, skepticism about its feasibility, or fears about its consequences. Such doubts, skepticism and fears are understandable. I do not think they are justified.

Properly conceived and conducted such negotiations will not involve only the insurgents. They will also hear the concerns and aspirations of all the communities, and take full consideration of, all the political and social constituencies in the country. They will also mobilize the support of all Afghanistan's neighbours, including, of course, Pakistan and Iran.

An International Task Force that Ambassador Thomas Pickering and I co-chaired, found that such negotiations were both urgently needed and possible. We also said that such a process would benefit immensely from the commitment and support of Afghanistan's neighbours and near neighbours. Indeed, the full title of our report was: "***The Century Foundation: Negotiating Peace: Report of the International Task Force on Afghanistan in Its Regional and Multilateral Dimensions***". Naturally we saw a central role in this process for the United Nations.

Be that as it may, the Solutions Strategy this Conference is meeting to discuss and support would benefit greatly from a political settlement that would put an end to the fighting and open the way to real, sustained peace. The Strategy will also fit well with the aims of the *Transition* Afghanistan is now in, and with the objectives of the *Transformation Decade* the Government of Afghanistan and the International Community have solemnly committed themselves to work for and achieve.

It seems to me that what you will be debating here today and tomorrow is about people, about men and women and children, about all those millions who, through no fault of their own have been reduced for years to the condition of refugees and IDPs: they deserve to be helped to regain their rightful, legitimate place back in Afghanistan to participate in the national reconstruction effort; it is about those communities mainly, but not only, in Pakistan and Iran who accepted those millions in their midst and shared, and continue to share with them the little they have. And it is about the entire peoples of those neighbouring States who also deserve continued international recognition and burden-sharing for their role in providing refuge to those millions of affected people over several decades.

That is what this quadripartite process is about and that is why it needs the renewed commitment and generous support from the Governments and Organisations you represent.

I thank you again Mr. High Commissioner for inviting me and am also grateful to you all, Ladies and Gentlemen for your attention.