

Statement by Daud Yaar, Ph.D.
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At SPECA Economic Forum, Ashgabad
June 6-7, 2011

Excellency Chairperson,

**His Eminence Mr. Rashid Meredov, Deputy Prime Minister and
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the brotherly Nation of Turkmenistan,
Honorable Mr. Jan Kubis, United Nations Under-Secretary-General
and Executive Secretary of the UNECE,
Excellencies Heads of Delegation,
Ladies and Gentlemen:**

It is a great pleasure to be among you today in the beautiful city of Ashgabad. In my mother tongue, Dari, the name Ashgabad literally means a place build by love and affection. Glimpses of Ashgabad since my arrival here have convinced me of the aptness of such a romantic name for such a beautiful city.

I would like to thank the government and people of the Republic of Turkmenistan for the generous hospitality we have been accorded. My thanks also go to the SPECA Secretariat for making Afghanistan and its sustainable development the main themes of this gathering. There can be no doubt that security, stability, and development in Afghanistan are key regional public goods that will greatly contribute to peace and prosperity in Central Asia. My statement here is an attempt at highlighting this crucial issue.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Afghanistan and its people have gone through devastating years of war and instability, caused by factors mostly beyond their own control. As someone belonging to the older generation of Afghans, I am old enough to remember an Afghanistan that, until late 1970s, was peaceful, friendly, developing, and forward-looking. I distinctly remember an Afghanistan that lived in peace with itself and the rest of the world. I remember an Afghanistan that, despite having a political system different from that of its neighbors, was at great ease with having close and expanding ties with them. I remember an Afghanistan admired and respected for its open-mindedness and friendliness in the region and in the world. I remember an Afghanistan free of extremism and terrorism. And I remember an Afghanistan that cherished freedom and promoted discourse among antagonist ideologies.

Unfortunately, the Afghanistan that I knew, and was raised in, became victim of a colossal geostrategic miscalculation in the spring of 1978. This miscalculation led to foreign occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and caused the country to slide into chaos. Many precious lives were lost; many millions were uprooted; roads, irrigation networks, hospitals, and other infrastructure were destroyed, the educational system collapsed, and law and order disappeared. The after-shocks and ripple effects of this chaos continue to affect and overshadow our own lives and that of our neighbors until this very day.

Today, after three decades of strife and suffering, Afghanistan is tiptoeing on the road to recovery. During the last ten years since the advent of the new republic, Afghanistan has had considerable

achievements, albeit not commensurate with the expectations of many. We have revived our dilapidated state institutions; we have rebuilt many of our roads and irrigation systems that were destroyed as a result of war and neglect; we have restored human rights and civil liberties that were trampled upon by ideologues and marauding warlords; we have reopened our schools and universities; we have put our devastated economy on a growth trajectory unprecedented in our history; and last but not least, we have opened our doors to the world and opted for an outward-looking diplomacy and liberal external economic policy.

As we move forward on the road to recovery and achieve further progress, we face new challenges, discover new paradoxes, hit new snags, and learn new lessons. As we endeavor to solve old, entrenched problems, we are challenged by new, emerging ones. Foremost among these emerging challenges are widening security lapses driven by elements and forces overwhelmingly trained, armed, and inspired in places beyond our borders. As a result, we are forced to fight two simultaneous wars: war against poverty and underdevelopment, and war against terrorism, lawlessness, and transnational organized crime. Being engaged in these two wars at the same time saps our energies to the greatest extent imaginable.

Undoing the devastating effects of the last three decades of wrongs, and responding to the new challenges, are not trivial tasks, achievable by Afghans alone. Recognizing this simple fact of our national life, we are looking at our neighbors and the rest of the world for assistance

and, not less importantly, for their understanding of the true source and nature of the threats we are facing.

Excellencies:

Extending a helping hand to Afghanistan and its people should not be mistaken for an act of charity and altruism. The central, pivotal location of Afghanistan; its deep-rooted historical, cultural, and human bonds with the rest of Asia, particularly with Central Asia; its formidable geostrategic significance; its long, porous borders; and its rich, yet untapped water, land, and mineral resources make Afghanistan an integral part of a better future for Asia and the rest of the world. Whoever helps Afghanistan to stand and remain on its feet, as a matter of fact, helps the region and the world to build a better future for generations to come.

The close bond between stability and prosperity in Afghanistan and stability and prosperity in the region is not a myth created by Afghans for self-serving purposes. This bond is not a marketing pitch invented by Afghans to attract the attention and sympathy of the world to their suffering. It is not a trick for rent-seeking. Afghanistan is not Rudyard Kipling's "white man's burden." This close bond is, rather, a reality that is deeply rooted and well-documented in history. It was Afghanistan through which the famous, highly coveted Chinese silk reached Rome, Delhi, and Baghdad. It was via Afghanistan that Buddhism spread to China. It was through Afghanistan that Islam reached the subcontinent and founded a new, shining civilization. It was Afghanistan that gave birth to Maulana Jaluluddin Balkhi who became the torch-bearer of the Islamic knowledge and illuminated Turkey and the rest of the Islamic world. It was Afghanistan that gave Ibn-e Sina to the world, the man

who became the recognized founder of the modern medical science. It was through Afghanistan that armies from Central Asia reached the subcontinent and established new, flourishing empires. It was Afghanistan through which the horsemen of the Gobi Desert sacked Baghdad. It was Afghanistan over which the two rival empires of the nineteenth century worried and competed, and engaged in what came to be known as the Great Game. And last but not least, it was in the mountains, valleys, and deserts of Afghanistan where the last skirmishes of the Cold War were fought, skirmishes that gave birth to a new world political order or disorder, as detractors of the new order tend to claim.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This brief historical account should suffice to convince us that Afghanistan is too important and too vital to be forgotten or to be treated carelessly with greed and without foresight. Neglect and interference both have been tried in Afghanistan in the past; both have failed to achieve their aims. Neglecting Afghanistan, in the sense of leaving it to its own inadequate devices, leads to cataclysmic consequences that can easily spillover beyond its borders. On the other hand, interfering in Afghanistan's affairs, violating its value systems, and undermining its sovereignty and independence cause fierce, relentless reaction among its people, leading to uprising and resistance, and creating tremors of instability and tension that easily affect others.

The lesson we learn from the past cycles of neglect and interference in Afghanistan is that dealing with the challenges that the country faces is a national duty that belongs to the Afghans themselves, a duty that

cannot and should not be taken over by others. At the same time, to be stable and peaceful, Afghanistan needs the assistance, cooperation and genuine good-will of its friends and neighbors. In light of this knowledge, what friends and well-wishers of Afghanistan can and should do today is to help the country stand on its feet by empowering its people to fight the challenges they face. This is a delicate task that requires a great deal of patience, foresight, and balancing acts. Quick fixes, hurried social engineering, and thoughtless tinkering with Afghan value systems can produce results that will prove catastrophic for all concerned.

Cooperation, based on the principles of mutual respect, understanding, and non-interference between Afghanistan and its Central and South Asian neighbors, can go a long way in this direction. Regional cooperation with, and through, Afghanistan in the areas of trade, investment, transit, transport, infrastructure, energy, resource management, environment, and collective security will not only enable Afghans to overcome their difficulties; it will also open new vistas and release new, potent energies for progress and advancement in the region. Connectivity and exchange of products and ideas through Afghanistan, without exaggeration, are the most potent foundations upon which Asia can build its future. Projects such as TAPI and CASA-1000 are exemplary models for Asia to open up to itself and to the rest of world.

Excellencies:

It is essential to keep in mind that in today's shrunken world, a suffering and unstable Afghanistan, spewing new, unpredictable threats, can,

and will, hinder progress not only in our own region but also in the greater Asia and the rest of the world. A better future for Asia and the world is indeed inextricably dependent on a better future for Afghanistan. And a better future for Afghanistan is possible only when our near and distant neighbors and friends engage in genuine cooperation with Afghanistan; resist the temptation of pursuing zero-sum games; and abandon the self-aggrandizing schemes of the past. A better future for Afghanistan, and for the region, will only become a reality if our neighbors align their interests with stability, development, and security interests of Afghanistan. Doing so will create a human space home to over 4 billion producers and consumers, a home in which we all can live in peace, prosperity, dignity, and pride.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

History has made it incumbent upon us to create the proper incentives and garner the political will to take speedy steps in the direction of creating this new, wonderful space. The obstacles we may face while trying to reach this vision shrink to almost nothing when we remind ourselves of two crucial facts: 1) these difficulties are imposed upon us neither by God nor by nature; they are, rather, of our own making, caused more often than not by deficient political will. And 2) it was only three hundred years ago that our continent, mother Asia, counted for more than 75 percent of the global output. Recognizing these two facts reminds us that poverty and underdevelopment are not our destiny; they are rather historical aberrations driven by wrong and short-sighted rivalries and politics and policies.

Excellencies:

It is time for us all to rise to the occasion and take bold strides toward combating insecurity, violence, discrimination, and the bigotry of low expectations that continue to dim our future prospects. We owe ourselves and our future generations to preserve our habitat and ecosystems, and to contribute to the richness of our God-given human potential and talent. Assisted by modern education and new technology, this human wealth and energy can easily bring forth a big-bang of human ingenuity and achievement no less epic and miraculous than the Industrial Revolution of the mid 18th century Europe. Let's commit to this lofty, noble vision, and join hands to make it come true.

Thank you very much for your attention.