

Press briefing

by NATO Spokesman, James Appathurai

JAMES APPATHURAI (NATO Spokesman): Friends and colleagues, thank you. Let me apologize very much for being late. I can tell you this spokesman convoy is the last one to leave a dinner like that. And it's not a convoy; it's a minivan. So it took me a little while to get out of the palace. Let me update you on where we are. Let me stress that this was an informal meeting but with some, I think, interesting issues of discussion and some clear ways forward.

Let me start with Afghanistan, getting right down to concrete business. I can confirm that the French government has offered a substantial military contribution to the operation in Afghanistan. They have made that offer for the East of the country. The United States has, building on that offer, agreed to offer troops to the South. These troops will meet Canada's requirement for a partner in the South that will allow Canada with the necessary contributions also in terms of equipment to extend its mission in Afghanistan till 2011.

This was very, very welcomed by all of the allies on the table. It is certainly welcomed to NATO as well. So that was very... a very substantial area of progress. I can tell you a number of other countries have also indicated that they will be increasing their contributions to the mission in Afghanistan. But there will be more substantive discussion of that tomorrow in a large meeting with all of the 40 countries participating in the mission as well as with the other international organizations. So you're very well aware of that.

Sticking with Afghanistan, there are some very clear themes that emerge, I would say unanimously from the 26 heads of State and government. One was that this is an alliance totally unified on Afghanistan, that this is an important mission, that it is important for preserving EuroAtlantic security, that it is important in the overall struggle against terrorism to ensure that al-Qaeda does not once again find Afghanistan to be a safe haven for them to launch attacks against all of our societies in terms of preserving our values, to ensure that the Taliban, amongst the worse human rights abusers in the world do not once again take power and reinstate the kind of regime of terror which they ran when they were in power.

So a) clear unity within the Alliance. This is a mission that must succeed, that will succeed. Second, a long-term commitment. All of the allies reiterated this will be a long-term commitment for NATO.

Third, that there was a general sense that we need to continue to work and indeed step up our efforts to work towards a phase in which the Afghans can increasingly take the lead, in other words to work towards a transition phase which will be in essence a transition phase that has two elements. One is that the Afghans having been given the support from the international community will be increasingly able to take the lead, including its security. And second, as security takes a root, that the civilian elements of the overall international effort can increasingly take the fore and that the security element will not necessarily have the profile that it has now as reconstruction,

development improved governance, can take a more full place in the spectrum of activities which are taking place in Afghanistan.

Second issue: enlargement. Final decisions, discussions will take place tomorrow. But I think it is safe to say that for the moment there is consensus for two of the three countries to enter the Alliance or to be offered invitations to begin accession talks, starting tomorrow. There's also a shared, indeed unanimous view within the Alliance that the third country The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹ should as soon as possible be offered the opportunity in accession talks. But well there's no secret, the Greek delegation made it very clear that until the name issue is resolved, it has not yet been resolved, that will not be possible. So that is where we stand on the name issue.

Finally, on Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine. Let me be very clear. I've seen the stories in the wires that appeared in the past few minutes. This discussion is going to continue through tomorrow. There's ongoing work now on language which could be agreed amongst allies I believe tomorrow morning. But this discussion will follow a certain number of elements and principles which I will share with you now.

First, that NATO's door is open. And NATO's door is open, including to Ukraine and Georgia. The unanimous principle around the table. To be more clear, they are, in principle, eligible to apply for NATO membership and to be considered for NATO membership.

There is... there was also a clear recognition that Membership Action Plan does not mean membership. There are two different stages of a process. And that needs to be clearly understood. It was clearly understood, of course, by Heads of State and Government.

Third, that no outside party has a veto or has an influence, a "droit de regard" on NATO decisions. There was a very, very strong sentiment around the table that any decisions on enlargement, on membership, on Membership Action Plan will be taken exclusively by the countries aspiring to membership and by the 26... at present 26 member States of the Alliance.

To conclude, the general sense was that Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine is a matter not of whether but of when. That was a shared sense around the table. The discussion will now continue on that basis. There will be further discussions tomorrow morning to set out the way forward. I can assure you based on what I have seen today that the Alliance will leave Bucharest completely unified on a way forward in dealing with the membership aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine. That is all I wanted to say until now. Let me take a few questions because it's late in the day. I don't know where the microphones are. James... Okay, I don't really seem to control the microphones. Go ahead.

Q: Hello, (INAUDIBLE) I would like you to express an opinion on NATO's behalf concerning today's incident between anti-NATO "manifestants" and the police... and the Romanian police. Do you think as a spokesman of NATO that the Romanian police handled this incident properly and in consensus with NATO's practices?

APPATHURAI: I have to be very honest. This is the first I've heard about this. So I don't want to comment on it until I've a little bit more about it, excuse me.

Q: Jim Neuger from Bloomberg. You said there was unanimity that the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia are not a question of whether but when. What are the chances that tomorrow will be the one?

APPATHURAI: I'm not going to handicap these discussions. I do not expect... I can't go that far. Let us wait to see what the discussions are tomorrow. Let me not go any further than that.

Q: (INAUDIBLE) Just to follow up on Jim. Be clear. Is there a possibility that talks can even focus on the possibility that being a MAP for Ukraine and Georgia during this meeting, would focus more on a subsequent offer? And on the Afghan troops, can you give us an idea of how many troops President Sarkozy is offering?

APPATHURAI: Yes, to answer your second question first: it is a battalion. So that is the unit. I do not know how many numbers of troops that will comprise. Obviously, as you know, between different countries, and the way in which you put it together, a battalion can range by quite a number. I will be very honest and I will be happy to be proven wrong, let me just address this question. I would be happy to be proven wrong, but for the moment, I do not expect Membership Plan for Georgia and Ukraine here at Bucharest.

Q: James, Paul Ames and the BBC. Could you just clarify something on Macedonia? You said that there will be further talks tomorrow. Is there a chance that at the end of this summit that Macedonia will, in fact, join the other two?

APPATHURAI: The Greek government has been very clear, including this evening's discussions. And until and unless the name issue is resolved, there cannot be consensus on an invitation for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to begin accession talks. They also have been very clear that they wish to see the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia walk through the door of NATO. That is why they accepted earlier that Skopje joins the Membership Action Plan. So that principle is not in question. Now, the actual discussions on the name are taking place outside of the strict NATO context. So I cannot comment beyond what I have told you. But that is the context in which we find ourselves now.

Q: (INAUDIBLE)

APPATHURAI: The other two are clear.

Q: James, Dieter Eberling (OVERLAP) from the German Press Agency. Just a question, what was the deadline set for an agreement between Macedonia and Greece on name issue. For example, like autumn, like October or December this year. And the other question, were there any threats by any other members of NATO to block the decisions on Croatia and Albania in case that Greece would continue with its blockage?

APPATHURAI: There were no deadlines set, nor would there be deadlines set by NATO when it comes to the name issue. As I said, NATO does not play first violin when

it comes to the name issue. And I don't imagine it would be for NATO to set deadlines on those discussions, nor indeed to engage itself in those discussions in any substantive. And no, there were no threats.

Q: Concerning Macedonia's...

APPATHURAI: Wait, wait. One at a time, one at a time.

Q: Just to follow up on Macedonia, on the willingness of inviting the three countries...

APPATHURAI: I'm sorry, can you start again?

Q: On the willingness of inviting the three countries, you said that all the countries told that they wished the three countries to be invited. Will that willingness be shown tomorrow by inviting them in the same table at NAC even if Macedonia doesn't get the invitation?

APPATHURAI: Let us wait to see what happens tomorrow.

Q: Concerning the Macedonia's invitation, you said "as soon as possible, the next chance". What does "as soon as possible" mean?

APPATHURAI: I don't think it's possible for me to define. I think in general, the hurdle that needs to be cleared is... the principal hurdle that needs to be cleared is of course the name issue. As to what happens after that, in terms of timelines, it would be impossible to predict. But the general consensus, and that includes the consensus of the Greek government is they wish to see all three MAP countries join the Alliance as quickly as possible once the necessary conditions are in place. And in this case that means resolution of the name issue.

Q: Yes, James, the Foreign Minister of Greece already said that there is no sufficient time to discuss any other proposal on name. So how creative do you think you can be in the next few hours? And does Macedonia then need to wait for next NATO summit or can the invitation be hand out at any time afterwards?

APPATHURAI: First, sorry to go over all ground, but it is not for NATO to be creative. NATO is not involved in the direct discussion on the name issue. When it is resolved, it will be resolved to the satisfaction of the two parties. And I might add the United Nations has a very important role to play here. And I think those hurdles would need to be cleared. But cleared in an appropriate... For as to when beyond that accession talk could begin, let's not get... let's not put the cart ahead of the horse.

I'm going to take one or two more and then I'm going actually try to have some dinner.

Q: (INAUDIBLE) Newspapers. Let me ask you two questions regarding the missile... missile defence system which will be possibly be deployed in Czech and Poland. Was it discussed so far? Will it be discussed tomorrow? And what are the crucial points? And the second question is on Tibet? Has anybody raised this issue? Or will it be discussed tomorrow and so on? Thank you.

APPATHURAI: Thank you. On missile defence, I expect that there could be... could have been, I have not been briefed, could have been already a discussion at the informal meeting of defence ministers that took place this evening. There has been a substantial amount of work that is already taking place in NATO headquarters. It may well come up tomorrow morning.

What I would invite you to do is look at the communiqué which will be released I hope at the end of tomorrow's NAC meeting, so in the morning or around noon, which will have, I predict, quite substantive and forward leaning language on missile defence or let me put it in another way, the allies have discussed and come to an agreement which needs to be endorsed tomorrow by heads of State and government on a way forward on missile defence which is quite forward leaning and sets the road forward for NATO defence within the Alliance for the coming... certainly for the coming year.

Q: Hum.

APPATHURAI: Oh sorry, Tibet. No, excuse me, Tibet was not raised this evening. I do not know if it will be raised tomorrow. It is not formally on the NATO agenda. This, you might imagine, is relatively far beyond the geographic area which normally falls under NATO's area of interest. One can never predict what heads of State or government raise. But it is not formally on the agenda for tomorrow either.

And I would take one more back there and that's it.

Q: ...News about the Polish President Kaczyński to the 25 other NATO members strongly criticizing Germany's position on NATO enlargement, especially Ukraine and Georgia. Has it been a topic at the dinner? Has it been evoked in any ways?

APPATHURAI: There was no strong criticism of each other, absolutely not at this table. Let me use a phrase allies use when discussing the different views of their colleagues, to paraphrase, many of them said: "I may not agree with some of the arguments I heard from President "X" or Prime Minister "Y" but I can see exactly why you say it. Because there are a range of very legitimate views to take into account when it comes to Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine."

But again, let me... let me say I'm quite confident that we will come out with a forward-leaning and completely unified position on this issue at the end of the discussions tomorrow. I may be proven wrong but from what I've seen tonight, I'm cautiously optimistic in that...

1. Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name.