



**Statement by Sweden at the Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, 3-4 December 2016**

Excellencies, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Sweden would like to express its gratitude to the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for co-hosting the Heart of Asia sixth ministerial conference.

Sweden aligns itself with the EU statement and I would like to make some additional comments in a national capacity.

Mr/Madam Chair,

The beautiful city of Amritsar sits on a trading route that has been here for millennia connecting Afghanistan with the sub-continent and further afield. It is high time to reconnect this ancient network of commerce and exchange and to let trade and economic activity lead the way to peace and prosperity. Before our eyes lies a plus 1,5 billion people market with a huge untapped potential and with needs that could be fulfilled through enhanced economic integration and connectivity.

The challenges in Afghanistan cannot be dealt with in isolation from the regional context. A stable and prosperous Afghanistan creates growth opportunities for the entire region. The Heart of Asia process plays a key role in this regard.

The current security situation in Afghanistan is of great concern. The first half of 2016 saw a record number of civilian casualties with 5166 people killed or injured. A very distressful fact is that almost one third were children. In addition, we also see an emerging humanitarian challenge with more than 1,5 million people on the move in Afghanistan. Either as internally displaced or returning refugees from neighbouring countries. The humanitarian situation calls for attention from the neighbouring countries and from the international community at large. People returning deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

The successful conferences in Warsaw and Brussels earlier this year provided an essential impetus to continue to build on the important achievements that have been made during the past 15 years. It is crucial to stay on course and to implement necessary economic and political reforms.

Mr/Madam Chair,

The Afghan people deserves peace. Peace and stability cannot be achieved without a conducive and constructive neighbourhood. An inclusive peace process leading to a political settlement is the only viable option and needs to be started now. The clear commitment and constructive engagement from Afghanistan's regional partners is critical. Sweden welcomes the commitment of the Afghan Government's efforts in the peace accord recently reached with Hezb-e Islami. Its implementation will require careful attention. Internal reconciliation is imperative to reach lasting peace and should be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.

Women and girls must be made part of the solution in Afghanistan - their economic empowerment, participation in all political processes, at all levels, as well as freedom from all forms of violence is a precondition for sustainable development. I especially want to highlight the importance of women's meaningful participation in a future peace process. Exclusion of half of the population will not lead to long-standing peace. And without peace there will be no development.

Mr/Madam Chair,

Despite the current challenges we must praise and salute the progress made. Sweden is encouraged by the Afghan Government's ambitious reform agenda, the increasing number of women in key positions in Afghanistan and the growing number of girls attending school. More needs to be done, of course, but in this pursuit of further progress, Sweden stands by its long-term commitment to Afghanistan.

Thank you.