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**JAMES APPATHURAI: NATO ENCOURAGES AZERBAIJAN, ARMENIA TO ENGAGE IN SUBSTANTIAL TALKS ON KARABAKH CONFLICT SETTLEMENT - INTERVIEW**

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APA presents interview with Mr. James Appathurai, NATO Secretary Generals Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia

Q: What do you think of the current level of Azerbaijan-NATO relations? How important is Azerbaijan to NATO?

A: We believe that when our neighbours are more stable, we are more secure. In that context, Azerbaijan is a valued and committed NATO partner. And cooperation between us is in our mutual interest. For instance, Azerbaijan contributes to our mission in Afghanistan. And at the same time, NATO is also helping Azerbaijan. NATO and our Allies have considerable expertise in defence and security sector reforms and Azerbaijan draws upon this resource: to modernise its armed forces and its defence education; to promote transparency in its armed forces; to undertake demining activities; and by participating in NATO exercises, like NATO's annual disaster response exercise, which will take an Azerbaijani team to Bosnia-Herzegovina later this year. NATO and Azerbaijan have recently agreed a new Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP). The plan sets out agreed objectives for cooperation, and agreed timelines to achieve them. Going forward, we encourage Azerbaijan to work more with us, including to meet the objectives of the Partnership Action Plan for Defence Institution Building, which Azerbaijan endorsed in 2004.

Q: Azerbaijan is currently cooperating with NATO within the Resolute Support Mission. What are the plans for the future?

A: We highly value the participation of Azerbaijan troops in NATO-led Resolute Support Mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. Azerbaijan is an active and steady contributor to NATO-led operations. Azerbaijan's current contribution to Afghanistan

includes 94 personnel and comprises political, military, logistical support, transit and non-military engagements such as training, humanitarian demining, and a financial contribution to the Afghan National Trust Fund with more than 1,6 million USD. We look forward to continuing this successful cooperation especially as NATO will continue to sustain its Resolution Support Mission.

Q: Is it difficult for NATO to work with a country that suffers from a conflict like Nagorno-Karabakh? What do you think of the future of this conflict?

A: Last years surge of violence, along with regular cease-fire violations along the line of contact, shows how important it is for all sides to withdraw the heavy weapons, exercise restraint, adhere strictly to the ceasefire, and reduce tensions. This is the only way toward a peaceful settlement as there is no military solution to this conflict. NATO plays no direct role in the negotiations to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They are conducted in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. However, we encourage both Azerbaijan and Armenia to engage into substantial negotiations and to work toward a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Q: As you know Germany has decided to withdraw its forces from the Incirlik military base in Turkey. What impact do you think this decision is going to have on NATO's stance on the region?

A: The Secretary General is in regular contact with both the Turkish and German leadership on this issue. We welcome the ongoing dialogue between them and hope these two important Allies will swiftly resolve this issue. This disagreement does not have any direct impact on NATO operations.

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