an individual country but fall within the framework of the international security system.

What we are aiming at is a flexible, modern, and highly professional army. This aim is what our immediate tasks are linked to – to professionalise and modernise our Armed Forces. At the moment, nearly 95% of the servicemen of the Air Force and Navy are professional, and so are nearly 70% of the Land Forces. This means that by the end of this year the Air Force and Navy will be fully professionalised, and by 2010 the Bulgarian Army will be fully professional. Of course, there are preconditions for this process to be speeded up and completed in two years' time. Parallel to transforming the service entirely into profession, the regular servicemen of the Bulgarian Army continue to improve there qualifications and professionalism in order to fully meet NATO standards and requirements.

Bulgarian and US Army soldiers train together on the proper way to enter and secure a residence during a Military Operations on Urban Terrain (MOUT) exercise at the Novo Selo training area in Bulgaria. (Photo: US Air Force/ Staff Sgt. Derrick C. Goode)

A Bulgarian contingent deployed with ISAF in Afghanistan. (Photo: Bulgarian MoD)

As far as the modernisation of the Armed Forces is concerned, we cannot expect to be completed in one or even in five years. The projects which we have been working on and which we already mentioned are large-scale efforts; they require time to prepare, as well as vast financial resources. It is important for us that this process be well planned and implemented step by step.

What I firmly believe is that these two tasks will be carried out with a high degree of professionalism and that Bulgaria will continue to confirm its role of a stability centre on the Balkans, of a reliable partner of the security generating states. We have the political will and capacity to achieve that.

MT: *Mr. Minister, thank you very much.*