



Supporting Afghanistan

Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs

Remarks at Press Conference

Kabul, Afghanistan

April 14, 2008

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Good morning, everybody. First of all, let me welcome you to the U.S. Embassy; second of all, say how pleased and excited I am to be back in Afghanistan. Every time I come here I seem to have a different list of things to do, but also a different sort of set of things that I learn. I think that's important. I come periodically. I think I was last here with the Secretary of State in January, if I remember the dates.

I'm pleased, I think, to see that all the effort that we're trying to make in Washington to support the people in Afghanistan -- the people of Afghanistan and our people in Afghanistan -- is showing good promise. So I think we're off to a good start this year.

The NATO and ISAF meeting at Bucharest where President Karzai went was a very good chance, I think, for all of us to come together on a strategy, come together on a commitment, to hear from President Karzai about progress that he's making and to hear from him about his intentions for things like taking over security for Kabul.

We have a new, stronger effort in the international community that's now headed by a UN Special Representative, Mr. Kai Eide, who's been here already and who's, I think, going to bring more concentration and coordination to our efforts.

The Afghan government is making a stronger effort at putting better governors, better sub-governors, out in the field and we're fully supporting those efforts. I see that as one of the more positive signs this year.

Police training, which has lagged behind in the past, is starting to catch up. I was pleased yesterday to visit a regional training facility in Mazar-e-Sharif and to see, particularly, National Civil Order Police, as those units are being trained together.

The Taliban threats this year of a "winter wave" seem to have gone the way of last year's spring offensive. It never really happened. And having been in Pakistan two weeks ago with our Deputy Secretary, I think another sign I would cite of a new start and a good start is the renewed energy in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

I think we all know that to help the people of Afghanistan live better lives, to help the people of Pakistan live better lives, we have to be able to bring government and bring stability to the border areas of both Pakistan and Afghanistan. While it may be done in different ways on each side of the border, what I've found in our discussions is a real commitment to work together, to coordinate with each other, to rebuild, to reenergize the jirga process of last year, to work on cross-border issues more intensely, so that the two governments really are bringing peace and stability to the people on both sides of the border.

And they also want to bring economic development to the people on both sides of the border. We're helping with that not only with direct funding but also with legislation to promote reconstruction opportunity zones that has now been introduced into our congress, which will allow people in those areas to make things and to export them.

I cite all these things that are going on. You have to remember, there are some really big challenges to deal with. There's still a problem of weak governance in the provinces and districts of Afghanistan. Together with that is the problem of corruption in various parts of the government of Afghanistan. Feeding the problem of corruption and feeding the problem of the insurgency is the problem of narcotics. There is an underlying problem of this being a very poor country that's had decades of troubles and that needs a while to rebuild and grow out of it.

But I think we're learning and adjusting. We're learning from what works, and adjusting our programs to make sure we do more of what works and change things that aren't working. So this year we want to make sure there's more coordination and concentration of planning between civil activities and military activities, planning and execution between the international community and the Afghan government; more focus on governance and particularly governance at the local level which is where Afghan people see their government, and where they expect things from the government. They expect to get safety and justice and economic opportunity and health care and education. We need to focus on how government can provide those things to the people of Afghanistan.

Finally, I'd say I'd expect to see this year more focus on key districts and key sectors, some of which have been neglected in the past.

So as I said, I think we're off to a good start. I think we've learned what works and we're trying to concentrate and coordinate our focus better this year, but we are really emphasizing the areas that are serving the Afghan people and that ultimately is the way to stabilize this country and beat back the insurgency.

Thanks for listening, and I'd be glad to take your questions.

QUESTION: [Inaudible] from Hasht-e-Sobh daily. He has two questions. The first question is regarding the upcoming presidential election. He said that President Karzai said that he would run for the presidential election in 2009, but there are some other reports from media that Ambassador Khalilzad will be running for the presidential election in Afghanistan.

So you as a U.S. government [official], which one would you prefer? Khalilzad, or President Karzai? [Laughter].

The second part of the question. He said you have mentioned about the existence of corruption within the government. Don't you think key government officials are involved in the corruption in Afghanistan?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: The first question on the election, I don't know how many times I'm going to have to say this in the next two years or year and a half, but the United States does not have a candidate. Our job is to work with the government of Afghanistan. That means the president, that means the ministers, that means the governors, that means the sub-governors, that means the army, that means the police, that means the parliament. On most of my trips -- I didn't get a chance to do it this time, but I usually try to go over and see the people at the parliament and find out what's going on over there and how they're working.

So the only person we want to see as President of Afghanistan is the person who gets chosen freely by the Afghan people in an election. Who that person is is completely for the Afghan people to decide.

On the question of corruption, I've seen it in a lot of parts of the region that I work in. It's a problem that affects everything from low-level government officials sometimes to very high-level government officials. Wherever they are, no matter how high or how low, they need to be dealt with because they really undercut the goals of the nation

and undercut the ability of government to provide what the people need.

President Karzai talked about his determination to get at this problem in his speech in Bucharest. He's had some people working on it. We look forward to seeing how he decides to move forward to really deal seriously with this problem.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]. You spoke about the necessity of developing both sides of the border, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The problem is, who [inaudible] and what [inaudible]?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You know, people talk about the Durand Line and the definition of the border and things like that. I realize there's an issue, but I deal in reality. I deal in practical things. There are border crossing points. There are places where trucks need to get across. There are places where last year at this time people were shooting at each other to protect a line that maybe some people dispute.

I want people to stop shooting across whatever that line is. I want people to start crossing the border at these checkpoints smoothly. I want them to go through the border crossing points smoothly. I want the trucks to move back and forth with goods. I want the manufactures to be made on both sides of whatever we call that line.

So no, I'm not into the historical and theoretical things. I see a border crossing point and I want to move it as smoothly as possible. I see a truck that's carrying goods one way or the other for export from Afghanistan or for supplies for the people of Afghanistan and I want that truck to move smoothly, without any trouble. I think those are the things the two governments want to work on. As they develop their relationships, as we do all the kinds of cross-border coordination, maybe they'll start dealing with other issues in the future, but right now I'm really focused on the practical aspects.

QUESTION: The man from [inaudible] News, his question is regarding counter-narcotics. He said that the Minister of Counter-Narcotics yesterday accused Pakistan...some neighboring countries, namely Iran and Pakistan, of not cooperating with Afghanistan on counter-narcotics in the country. And there will be another conference about the same issue. Do you believe that Pakistan and Iran are not cooperating with Afghanistan on counter-narcotics? What's your comment on that? Stopping trafficking on the border?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I didn't see the Minister's remarks. I haven't had a chance to talk to him about it so let me just address the issue generally.

I do think there's a lot of desire to deal with this problem. I work with people in Central Asia as well, where we work on coordination and border control to stop the drugs from being able to move through that region. I know that Iran has built fences and blocks, does a lot to try and prevent the trafficking coming across the border into Iran, and Pakistan is doing a lot. We work a lot with Pakistan to identify the routes and interdict the shipments that go through Pakistan. We may be able to intervene and interdict sometimes, but obviously there are still a lot of drugs moving through these various routes. So if there are some areas we need to improve cooperation, I'm sure the Minister can help us identify those. I do think we should all work harder.

QUESTION: It's the spokesperson, not the Minister himself.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Having been a spokesman, I assume spokesmen say what the Minister wants.

QUESTION: [Inaudible], from Afghan Voice Agency. Two questions. One question is regarding the U.S. cooperation and commitment to Afghanistan and Pakistan. You said that U.S. will support Afghanistan in terms of economic and different aspects, but what would you do with Pakistan? Is it the same cooperation that you do with Afghanistan you do with Pakistan?

The second part of his question is regarding NATO troops supplying Taliban in Helmand Province. What's your comment on that?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: On the question of Afghanistan and Pakistan, we're working, I think, very hard with the new Pakistani government to take advantage of the opportunity to build democracy and help work with them against extremism. As you know we have a very strong, long-term, high-level commitment to working with Afghanistan. We also have a very strong and long-term commitment to working with Pakistan. We do things in different ways. There are different conditions, different infrastructure, different governing structures. So we work differently with each country, but essentially we're doing the same thing. We're trying to help bring good government to all the people of the country, especially in the border areas.

What I find in the United States, even though we're going through our own election this year, there's a lot of support from both parties -- a lot of support from the Congress as well as the administration -- of continuing very strong commitments to both Pakistan and Afghanistan. We're talking to our Congress about how to do that.

As far as his story of people dropping weapons in the wrong place, I don't know much about it. I just read about it in the newspaper this morning. It's obviously a mistake. It would be ludicrous to suggest that anybody did something stupid like that on purpose. We'll have to look into it and investigate it, find out how it happened and make sure it never happens again.

QUESTION: You said that that was a mistake, [inaudible] from Khalid Radio. You said that, you just said this was a mistake. But this is a mistake, it's not the first time that it happened. It happened several times in the past. A Pakistani general also accused U.S. troops in Afghanistan of supporting the Taliban and Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. What do you say?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: That's ridiculous. That's one of the dumbest things I've heard in a long time. There is no way, no reason, no explanation that one could ever give for anybody's support for the Taliban and Al-Qaida. They've killed us, they've killed you, they've killed Pakistanis, they've killed Europeans. There is no way they're going to get anything from us other than justice.

QUESTION: From Radio Free Europe, just a follow-up to his question on the same issue.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Don't do that.

QUESTION: He said that the members of the Afghan Parliament yesterday did discuss this issue and they were very, very sensitive and serious about this issue, and they accused some of the NATO member countries involving in this issue, of supporting the Taliban.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't see any sign of that, any sign of any support that anyone is giving to the Taliban.

QUESTION: But do you accept this helicopter mistakenly dropped some ammunitions and logistics to --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't know for sure, we're still investigating. It may have happened. If it happened, it's a total mistake.

QUESTION: Khalid from Roz News Agency. He said that the money or the aid which was contributed to Afghanistan over the past six years, 70 percent of those aid were spent through IOs and NGO channel or through the international channel. And we have seen that that did not work in Afghanistan. Is there any plan that you change that policy?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: First of all, I think your number's wrong. But there is a process underway of training, supporting, improving the ability of the Afghan government to do things. I was just over this morning talking to Dr. Popal about the local governance initiative. As they develop, and the Afghan government develops the people in the provinces who can plan projects and carry them out, they will be spending more of the money directly.

We're spending more money through the capable ministries, the ministries that have shown they can do things in the field: the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of [Rural Rehabilitation] and Development, the National Solidarity Program, the Ministry of Health. A lot of these ministries have been reformed, have developed their capabilities, and I want to make sure that as they develop their capabilities, that we make sure they have the resources to carry out their programs.

Some of these big projects -- like the Ring Road or the electrical system for the country, or a lot of roads in the provincial capitals -- these are big projects that require a lot of skills, a lot of planning, and we've gone ahead with them using contractors, sometimes foreign contractors, but also developing Afghan contractors. So it's not just a matter of Afghan government capabilities, but we're also trying to develop the Afghan private sector capabilities to supply things and to do construction.

Two years ago I was in Panjshir. I saw the road built in Panjshir Valley by a Turkish company. It's a good road. It helps people in the valley. But this year I was in Kunar and I saw the road in the Kunar Valley built by Afghan contractors. So I think we are moving forward, and we want to move forward as fast as we can in developing capabilities on the Afghan side. And just as we're seeing on the security side, we want to see the Afghans more and more in charge and more and more taking the lead in governance and development. Frankly, I spent a lot of time during this visit working on that issue.

One or two more.

QUESTION: New York Times. You mentioned that the wave of the winter didn't happen, but [inaudible] Pakistan, the security there, [inaudible]. Doesn't it make you worried that the Taliban or the insurgents are stronger than ever on the other side, [inaudible] this side when they want to [inaudible] attention?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't think the answer is stronger than ever. It still has a strong presence on the other side, sure. What --

QUESTION: [Inaudible].

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No. They've been challenged by the government, I think. That's where I'd give you the answer. They've been challenged and they're fighting back. We are seeing more attacks in Pakistan. But I think they were probably as strong in previous times, it's just they were directing all their fury at Afghanistan. So what we're seeing is now a lot of, first of all, a lot of Pakistanis unfortunately getting killed by these extremists, but also a lot of determination on the Pakistani side to deal with it. To some extent the extremists in those areas are now fighting on two fronts. They have to deal with the pressures from the Pakistani side and the pressure from the Afghan side. The more we can do that in concert with each other, I think the more squeezed the Al-Qaida and the Taliban supporters in those areas will feel. That's one of the goals of all this cross-border coordination.

QUESTION: Mohamed Mohammadi from Salam Watander Radio. He is asking what do you say on the Russian involvement in Afghanistan and Russian involvement in the fight against terror in Afghanistan? And also what, the question is mainly about this.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think Russia and a lot of other countries have been part of this process, supporting the building of the Afghan government. They have interests in seeing Afghanistan strengthen itself as a nation, able to control terrorism, able to control drugs. We just talked about how some of the drugs go in that direction. I do think they have to be sensitive to their history here, but as long as the Afghan government's comfortable with their involvement and they participate with the rest of the international community in supporting the government, then that's a good thing.

QUESTION: Do the U.S. and NATO see Afghanistan from Russia's glasses, from Russia's perspective?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No. That's a thorough and complete answer. No.

Thank you very much.

