



U.S. Committed to Afghanistan

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Remarks to the Press
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ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Good morning everyone. It's nice to be back. It's nice to see many of you again. I was very glad this time to come to Afghanistan and Pakistan with General Petraeus.

We had some very good meetings and discussions with President Karzai and others, and then we spent Thursday and Friday visiting American troops and visiting international troops. We were able to go out to some of the areas in Paktika and Khost and Kandahar and Helmand that are very important places right now, and where I think we're seeing, frankly, a lot of positive change, a lot of very difficult challenges.

I also wanted to spend one more day having more diplomatic and political meetings, so I spent today having meetings with the Foreign Minister and meetings at the palace.

I think the United States, like all the international community, really remains very committed to Afghanistan. We're looking, I think, ourselves at how we can do more and how we can do better in supporting the Afghan government as it continues to build its capabilities to serve the people of Afghanistan and as it continues to extend itself farther and farther out into the countryside.

We've seen a lot of new developments here throughout the year, particularly in the last few months: new Ministers, new governance, new Governors, new programs, that I think are very important and we are fully supportive of those efforts. We've also seen a lot of reminders that we're dealing with some very nasty and dangerous enemies and we recognize that their adoption of more terrorist tactics, bombings, and kidnappings have made people feel less safe.

I think you're all aware of the many achievements of health care and education, roads, electricity. But I think this basic process of getting out and helping the government be more capable, helping the police be more capable, helping the Afghan army be more capable, the process of sort of extending the web of government is going to be the way we deal with those who would like to set fires and bombs.

As you all know, we've just had a very exciting election in the United States. I was rather touched to be in Afghanistan, and have it be here that I was hearing the results. In a way, our election is the time that we all get involved in public debate. It's the time that we all rededicate ourselves to our democracy. And I think it gave me a sense that that's what Afghanistan can look forward to next year as you head into your own elections.

So we'll be going through a transition process in the United States. I'm sure this administration will continue to do everything we can while this administration, while this President is still in office. And I'm confident that the United States' support for, strong support for a moderate, independent and democratic Afghanistan will be continuing into the next year and the years beyond.

That's what I wanted to say. I'll be happy to take questions.

QUESTION: Moderate or modern?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Actually, both. I said moderate this time. I'm happy to say modern as well. I think they're all sort of embodied in the way the government's been going, where the country's been going. Either one applies.

QUESTION: Recently the *Washington Post* had an announcement in which it was stated that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar might have a role in Afghan policy in the future. Do you see any role for him in Afghanistan's future in the government arena?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I would find it hard to imagine that that would happen. I don't think I want to speculate on things like that. There's been no sign from people like that that they're willing to abandon violence, accept the constitution and account for their past misdeeds. So I really...I think that's extremely speculative. This is a man that continues to kill and endanger ordinary Afghans.

QUESTION: I'm from *AFP*. In Pakistan, the government is concerned about the airstrikes, they're concerned about the airstrikes are continuing. I wonder if you could explain a little bit about how you see that and the government's concerns that they will continue?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Let me put it this way: I'm not a military expert; I'm not going to talk about any particular military actions. Our goal is to work with Pakistan, and frankly to work with Pakistan and Afghanistan, to deal with a common threat that comes out of the border area.

In recent months the Pakistanis have been fighting in Bajaur and they've seen fighters come across from Afghanistan. So sometimes those people move in both directions. I think we recognize that.

I guess where the United States starts is to say: our goal is to have it so Pakistan and Afghanistan both can have proper control over their territory, proper governance on both sides of the border, all the way up to the border. We understand that the only real stability is going to be achieved by having the writ of authority, the writ of government, to extend in those places. So our emphasis is really in helping them do that.

There are some very dangerous people in these border areas that are attacking, threatening us, that are threatening Pakistan directly, that are threatening Afghanistan. I think the government in Pakistan understands that the threat is directly to them and they are fighting this war for their own reasons. But these threats need to be dealt with. I'm sure we all have different means and different capabilities that we bring to this, but I think we understand that the only way to get this properly is to cooperate.

What we really emphasized in our discussions in Pakistan was: how do we work jointly, how do we look jointly at the problem and deal jointly with the problems? Where the Pakistanis are taking action on their side of the border, we and the Afghans and the international coalition take action on this side of the border in a manner that squeezes the militants and gets rid of them.

As I said, we'll all use our different capabilities, perhaps in different ways sometimes, but the essence of what we're trying to do is to cooperate across the border so that we're dealing with the militants in a joint manner.

QUESTION: Two days ago President Karzai said that civilian casualties are damaging relations with the United States. I know you're not military, but how damaging at a political and economic level, how damaging are these civilian casualty occurrences to relations?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't think they've damaged the fundamental relationship. We're involved together in a cooperative endeavor to make the Afghan people safe and we all understand as we do that we need to take every possible step to avoid, eliminate, any occurrences of civilian casualties.

I think we also understand together with our Afghan partners that we're dealing with an enemy that often deliberately inserts itself in villages or compounds or...the other

day they were fighting from within a wedding party and put them in harm's way. So it's very difficult to avoid these incidents.

But I think you've heard from General Petraeus, you've heard from General McKiernan, you've heard from all the international representatives, and the Afghan army, too. We're doing everything possible to try to reduce and minimize these incidents and to cooperate if they do occur: cooperate with the Afghans on joint investigations, getting the facts, cooperate with the people of the area to try to understand what happened and learn from it and make sure it doesn't happen again. We understand the seriousness of the issue. We are pledged to do everything possible to reduce civilian casualties to a minimum, and to cooperate with our Afghan partners in dealing with any consequences of those activities.

QUESTION: Aunohita Mujumdar, freelance journalist. You talked about seeing positive changes in the provinces you had visited, and also the extending reach of the government. But there is increasing violence in these provinces that you mentioned, and the government, international agencies, have been talking about the decreasing access to different parts of the country. What in your experience leads you to believe otherwise?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, I think there's a couple of things. One, the security forces are extending themselves into new areas. There are districts and parts of the country where there wasn't much presence before and we're now operating in those districts now. We're now working with sub-Governors at the district level, with local people in community development programs or social outreach programs, things like this, that are really pushing the government more and more out into the districts and the countryside.

There is a lot of violence. There's violence in the areas where it's been before and there's violence in the new areas where you have troops going in. But behind that, there are also other areas that are more and more peaceful. So, [in] any given province, if you talk to the Governor you'll hear: "I've got real bad problems in a couple of districts. I've got a better situation"...like in Konar..."in the valley, where things are starting to stabilize. Farmers are selling their goods and finding opportunities." So it's a very mixed picture.

Now it's true, as the Taliban, as the enemy, has adopted these tactics of just creating violence and insecurity, that they've been able to go out and set off bombs, and it makes people nervous. It makes people wonder about going to the market or sending their kids to school. We're going to have to deal with that. That phenomenon is very difficult to deal with. But essentially it's about making people feel safe. So all these efforts to extend the government, get out there in the countryside, work with the communities that I see going on, that's in the end what's going to make people feel safe.

I think there are a lot of specifics. There's roads being built in new places, there's different projects going on and meetings going on. One specific -- there was a spike in violence around the Ring Road, some parts of the Ring Road, in the summer time. There were bombs, there were Taliban activities. I think we've been able to reduce that. That's gone down. People feel safer traveling on the road again. So there are things like that. I think, that show that when we really apply our efforts, we can deal with these spikes in violence and we just have to be able to deal with them more thoroughly throughout the country.

QUESTION: President Karzai said several times that international military forces must stop operations in the villages. Then he said they have to do this. I don't know how serious he is about that, if he's doing anything diplomatically. But you said we're doing everything we can to avoid these incidents. I spoke with an American military official yesterday and asked him, given the fact that the Taliban are drawing the fights into these villages, one day they may have to just say: "okay, we're not firing into villages. We know we'll hit civilians." He said that's under discussion at ISAF headquarters, actively. Coupled with Karzai's demand that there are no more operations in villages and civilian deaths, is this anything that's being discussed at a political level?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I haven't encountered any discussion like that. I think we've all looked at...the military's already put out guidance on how they operate to their forces. We do a lot more now with Afghan troops. I think over half of the operations actually have Afghan forces in the lead now, so there's a lot more joint operations. That tends to maybe operate with a little more cultural sensitivity or whatever...that we think tends to reduce civilian casualties. I think people are looking carefully at how we use air power when it's necessary.

So there are a lot of things that are being done by the military, but the guys who really know how to do this are looking at all the possible ways and just kind of constantly making sure we're doing everything we can to reduce it. But I haven't been party to any specific discussions of 'in or not in villages.'

No village wants to be left as a playground for the Taliban. These people, unfortunately, have had the experience of living with the Taliban in their villages, and I think nobody wants to repeat that if they can avoid it, so we need to be able to protect the villagers and sometimes that will mean operating in or near the villages.

QUESTION: Anand Gopal, *Christian Science Monitor*. The strategy of trying to split the insurgency and winning away moderate elements -- people who have moved away from the more extremist, ideological inclined Taliban and Al-Qaida -- how seriously has this been discussed in the State Department? And if so, what will this look like?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think it's really an ongoing process. I talked about the process of extending governance. A key part of that is, sort of, the Governors and the district Sub-Governors and the way we support them and give them the capability of serving the needs of communities. So they need to be able to use the National Solidarity Program, or use what the Ministry of Education can do, or Health, to talk to villagers and give them what they need from the government: safety, security, justice, opportunity, services. As you do that, you talk to people who may have been caught in the middle, who may have previously supported the Taliban for whatever reason and try to bring them to the side of government.

So I think this process of social outreach, community outreach, whatever you call it -- and there are a number of programs underway -- is one that sort of eats away at the support base for the Taliban. It brings to the side of the government the villagers who really prefer to get the safety, justice and opportunity from their government, and as long as their government can provide that, are very happy to be supporting the government. I think that's essentially what you're talking about, people who may have fought for local reasons, tribal reasons, local reasons, being left out or caught in the middle. You can bring them in with these sorts of government outreach programs.

I should add one thing. It's not so much a Washington strategy as it's an Afghan strategy that we support. You've seen the Afghans this year set up the [Independent] Directorate for Local Governance. They've just appointed a new Minister of Interior who's working on police reform and providing better policing to the people out in the countryside, as well as making the cities safer. So I think there's a lot of effort in this direction on the Afghan government side that we're trying to support.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) from *Ariana Television*. As you're aware, sir, Senator Obama during his campaigns has made different promises and pledges to Afghans. He mentioned the possible change in the U.S. strategy towards Afghanistan. Also mentioned that the strategy as far as Afghanistan was not an effective one and he is planning to change that. In the mean time, he promised that terrorist safe havens will be targeted on the other side of the border, on the Pakistani side of the border. How practical do you think these pledges will be? Will they be delivered to Afghans?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think the one thing we heard from both candidates in the campaign is a lot of emphasis on Afghanistan and Pakistan. And indeed, Senator Obama has made it very clear that one of his major foreign policy priorities...I guess I should start calling him "President-elect Obama"...has made very clear that one of his very important priorities is to focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan. I think in the end that will translate into specific policies as we go through the transition.

I can't predict exactly how you'll see it, but I would expect there's a real commitment to do more in terms of troops, in terms of development aid, in terms of support and assistance, and to really work with the Afghan government to do more, so that we're all contributing to momentum in the right direction.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) from *Pajhwok Afghan News*. President Karzai mentioned that he doesn't want foreign forces to be stationed in the cities or central portions of the country. Instead he wants them to be in the border regions and to try to prevent the violent activities, terrorist activities. As I learned from now, the U.S. is considering sending additional troops to Afghanistan. Will those troops be deployed to the border regions, or...

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't know. I don't decide that. What I would tell you is we'll go where it's necessary. We'll go where we can provide more Afghans with more security. If you look at where I've seen U.S. forces, I've either seen them in provinces where the Provincial Reconstruction Teams are working with Governors, or -- this trip we went out to a border outpost in Paktika, right on the edge of the border with Pakistan. We went to visit some Marines who were in Northern Helmand working in districts around the Helmand-Farah, area -- going in new places, working with the Governors, working with the Sub-Governors, working with the people there. That's where we need to be, so we'll go where we need to be to provide security, help provide security to the Afghan people. We'll go where we need to be, where the Afghan police are deploying, where the Afghan army is deploying, where we can support their efforts.

I'm getting signals I've got time for one more question. Anybody who hasn't had a question yet who wants to take it?

QUESTION: (Inaudible) from *To10 TV*. Recently the Pakistani government swapped a few Taliban leaders with a number of their military officers. Continuation of Pakistani deals with the Taliban insurgents does not damage their role in the war on terror? How do you view...

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I saw those reports. I really haven't had a chance to look into it, so I don't know how true they are or exactly what happened.

The one thing I would say is that we've seen a lot of determination from the government in Pakistan. We've seen a real determination to fight the terrorism, because it's important to Pakistan. So for example, this week as we went around, we talked to political leaders, we talked to military leaders, we talked to people in government and in the parliament. I think they're really focused on how to deal with the problem of extremism, how to deal with the problem of 'miscreants, militants' as they call them, because they understand how important it is to establish stability for Pakistan for the long term. I think they're demonstrating this with the military action in Bajaur, with a lot of the other steps that they're taking every day to fight the menace.

So I think they have this determination firmly in mind, but what exactly happened in this situation, I don't know.

Thank you very much. It's good to see you. See you next time.

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