

South and Central Asia Regional Update

Senior State Department Official

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MODERATOR: Good afternoon. I just wanted to welcome you all here. I wanted to make sure that it's clear that this afternoon we are with a senior State Department official and we are on background. So I know there may have been some changes in that regard, so without further ado I will welcome our senior State Department official and he'll make a brief statement and then take your questions. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Good afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm just going to say a few words at the beginning and then take your questions, and then hopefully we can have an easier conversation under these ground rules than we might with all the lights on and the formality of "on the record."

We've talked before about the strategic outlook in the region, the opportunities of connecting South and Central Asia, the opportunities of creating stability in Afghanistan and what we've called democratic stability throughout this region. And I guess what I'd say is we think that's starting to happen. The highways from Almaty to Karachi, lots of pieces being built. Come August we'll open the bridge between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The electricity lines bringing electricity Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, that's starting to happen. Turkmenistan is now looking for new opportunities.

Afghans -- the Afghanistan reconstruction process has gotten fairly far along. The economy is growing well. The licit economy, the regular economy, is growing well. Unfortunately, the poppy economy has stayed very high. But you have the ring road system in Afghanistan and a lot of what we'll be doing in the future is also to expand the ability of Afghanistan to operate as a regional center.

And so I think we're putting together the pieces. It's a long way. It's a long challenge, but we're starting to see that happen. Afghanistan this year, we're going to face a difficult dangerous, bloody-minded enemy. The Taliban will come back when the snows melt and they've threatened a lot of suicide attacks. They failed last year to take territory or cities and towns, and they're going to resort more and more, I think, to suicide bombings, which is a horrible thing.

If you look at who they attack, you know, who do the Taliban attack? They attack school kids and teachers because that's a threat to what they stand for. They attack small police outposts. Any government presence, any regular government presence, is a threat to what they stand for. They attack government officials who are trying to bring services to people throughout the country. They attack marketplaces where people are trying to make money in a legitimate fashion. And I think we're going to face that. We've got to face that. We're facing that already in terms of military operations, government outreach, new appointments that President Karzai has made, new road projects, electricity projects, the new money that the United States is asking for from our Congress, the new troops the United States has decided to put there. And we face the springtime with I think more government, more police, more army, more NATO, more road projects, more electricity, more rebuilding than we had last year in Afghanistan, so I think we're in a better position this year. It doesn't mean it won't be a nasty process, but the fundamental process of building government, extending government, extending the benefits of government throughout the country are going on.

And fundamentally, the Government of Afghanistan is extending itself and the Taliban are under pressure from all sides, including from Pakistan. I think many of you have followed closely what's going on in the tribal areas. The tribal elders seem to be trying to take back the control that they want and get rid of some of the foreign fighters. There have been steps by Pakistan against some of the Taliban that are in the tribal areas. And so I think we can say that the Taliban and the al-Qaida supporters are under pressure from all sides, including from Pakistan, and that's a good development, too.

So as we face this new year, we have a lot to do, a lot of determination to do it. We've made clear that our relationships in the region are strategic and long-term and that we're trying to help people achieve what they want in their lives, achieve certain long-term stability, a democratic system, give their kids an education, give their kids economic opportunity, give their kids a choice in the future of their country and their government. And that's what we're there for and I think we're doing better this year.

The reason I thought it was a good time to convey this message and talk to you about these things, we're in the budget season. You've seen us present a large request to our Congress to fund programs for Afghanistan. We've presented a similarly large request for Pakistan -- a large request for Pakistan, not quite of the same magnitude, but also asked for increases so that we can support the economic development of the tribal areas of Pakistan. So we are asking for new money from our Congress and what I wanted to explain is the context in which we're doing that and context in which we expect to carry out these programs.

So that's enough for me. I'd be glad to take questions about programs or specifics. Sorry, we'll -- I'm going to leave Jess the honor of figuring out the question order.

QUESTION: Good afternoon. Thanks for coming over to brief us. Dimitri Kirsanov with TASS, the Russian news wire service. I wanted to ask you to give us an update on the idea of creating trans-Caspian pipeline or pipelines. Evan Feigenbaum said several weeks ago that you are in the middle of the feasibility study of this project.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah.

QUESTION: And with new leadership in Turkmenistan, do you see this republic in this picture at all or --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think the new leadership brings new opportunities for Turkmenistan. They have said they want to explore some of these possibilities. And one of the problems in the previous regime in Turkmenistan is you could never get solid figures on oil and gas reserves. You never really knew if they were not promising the same gas to several different places and they signed feasibility studies and intentions and made announcements about all kinds of things over the years, from a pipeline down through Afghanistan to exports to China and standing exports to Russia, lots of things. And so the ability to work on I'd say a more international standard basis with Turkmenistan I think is an opportunity for them and for all; for them because they can get a better return on their investment, return on their natural resources; and for all because some of these projects can be evaluated on an economic and commercial basis. And so I think there is the opportunity to do that. Feasibility studies that we're supporting are going on about trans-Caspian oil and gas. They're not really far advanced yet. I wouldn't hold your breath on seeing them. They're complicated matters. But it is a matter under considerable discussion. Kazakhstan has a lot of oil coming online that they're going to need to transport and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan remains a good route for some of that.

I'd point out though that people are still trying to expand the pipeline through Russia, develop other export markets in China. There's sufficient energy supplies here that both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are going to have to look for multiple ways of connecting themselves to the world markets and multiple ways of connecting themselves to Europe, to the south and elsewhere.

So I think all those things will be explored and, you know, those which are economically viable will be done. We have supported all these opportunities, whether it's expansion of the pipelines through Russia or looking at trans-Caspian or seeing what could be sold to China or seeing what could go south.

QUESTION: You spoke of the democratic stability in the region. Do you see the ongoing protests against President Musharraf as democratic forces asserting themselves?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I don't think I would quite characterize the situation yet. It's obviously -- it's a very sensitive issue when it comes down to accusations that are made against the judiciary. And so we recognize that. We recognize it needs to be handled carefully and needs to be handled within the system that Pakistan has for dealing with such allegations. And that means the supreme judicial council is going to have to constitute itself and review these situations. And I think after that more information becomes public, but they get the first take on the charges and the evidence and the situation. So we'll look to them to handle this in what we hope is a careful manner and a manner that's fully in accord with the law and the procedures in Pakistan and the judicial standards of Pakistan.

So that's kind of what we're looking for. We're following it very closely and obviously we have some concerns about the violence that's broken out, but I think we want to see this handled in an appropriate judicial manner. We'll watch it closely as it goes along.

QUESTION: Does U.S. expect General Musharraf to take off his uniform this year?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: That's one of the questions he said he would deal with in the process of the elections, and we'll just have to see how it's handled.

QUESTION: What did he say? Sorry, we didn't hear.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The question of the uniform is the one that Musharraf -- President Musharraf himself -- has said he intends to deal with, I think he said in accordance with the constitution during this process of elections, and we'll see how it's handled. It's not the only question involved. There's a lot of questions involved in the election that will have to be decided and worked with. Our goal is to hope that the election is free and fair and open, that the people of Pakistan get a chance to decide their leadership.

QUESTION: Is the U.S. expectation that he would this year at least take off his uniform, at least or (run?) office?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Every time I come here you ask me the same question; I give you the same answer. I can do it five times today if you want.

QUESTION: Because in the Pakistani press they raised --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I know, but they're not always right. And we all know the headline writers are particularly not always right. I would just say that we think this is a matter he said he's going to handle in accordance with the constitution during the process. And we'll -- it's one of many matters involved in the election process that will get settled as we go along. Our interest is in the overall process being a free and fair one, the Pakistani people getting choice and a return of Pakistan to a democratic form of government.

MODERATOR: We have a question from New York. Go ahead, please. Identify yourself.

QUESTION: UN report that came out yesterday on Afghanistan indicated that most of drug is smuggled through Iran and Pakistan that is going out of Afghanistan. Do you think Pakistan and Iran are doing enough on their behalf to stop drug trafficking? And by the way, this is Kahraman Haliscelik from KanalTV of Turkey. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think everybody has a very strong interest in doing as much as we can against narcotics in the region. And you're right, there is a large portion that are now coming south out of Afghanistan into Pakistan and then across Iran and I think through Turkey onward to Europe. There's another large flow, perhaps not quite so large but still very significant, that goes up through Eastern Europe and Russia and ends up in those countries as well as in Europe.

So there are a lot of countries involved in this that have to do their maximum to stop the flow of drugs. We cooperate with many of these countries. We have very active programs to stop the production and to deal with the situation and give people alternatives inside Afghanistan, and that remains a high priority for us. And you've seen in our budget request we've -- for the supplemental funding -- a significant chunk of that is for counternarcotics.

Then we work with the countries on the periphery -- Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, actually all the way up through Kazakhstan and Russia -- to try to help them strengthen their anti-narcotics efforts, strengthen their controls. We work with multilateral groupings that are doing this. There's a UN center to exchange information that we very supported that's being set up or I think that by now has been set up in Almaty. So we're trying to work this on an international scale as well and cooperate with all the countries that are affected by the drugs in Europe, Russia and elsewhere.

And this has been an important part of my conversations with other countries, an important part of my conversations in Moscow, for example, where we all need to do our maximum. And until we've stopped this flow, stopped the production, stopped the flow, stopped the demand, we're going to have to keep at it.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Administration Official. My name is Arshad Mahmud and I represent the Daily Prothom Alo in Bangladesh. I have just two quick questions. One is regarding a convicted killer of the father of the nation who has recently been arrested in Los Angeles on charges of immigration violation. And I gather from newspaper reports that both the governments are trying to work out something so that he can be sent back. If you could update on that which is an extremely important issue for Bangladesh, as you know.

And the number two is I am sure you are aware of what's going on in Bangladesh currently and there is a growing perception among a large section of the people there that the United States is trying to pressure the government to hold elections as soon as possible, which is against the will of the people. And this is being interpreted as some kind of, you know, pressure, as I said, by the United States, which is in line with what the two (inaudible) political parties are demanding. So could you please clarify your position on that? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: On the first, on the arrest in LA, I'm afraid I don't have anything on that. I'm going to have to look into it and get back to you. Second of all, on the sort of the overall situation in Bangladesh, I think we've made quite clear that we believe that we are still in a situation with a caretaker government whose job it is under the Bangladesh constitution to get back to an election, and that Bangladesh's democracy is very precious to us and to the people of Bangladesh, and that the goal of this government has to be to develop a program to get back to elections.

And so what we've looked for is not so much a particular date as the timeline for doing that, the process to do that. They say they want to clean up politics, they want to clean up corruption problems, they want to sort of lower the level of political violence and create a certain political renewal, but the goal has to be to get back to elections so there are a number of steps along the way -- voter lists, photographs, decisions that the election commission has to make. And so we're interested in seeing the timeline, I think, and being able to satisfy people in Bangladesh that the timeline -- that there are a series of steps that will be carried out to get back to an election.

QUESTION: I just want to be absolutely clear about this. It's a very critical issue. Your Ambassador is saying on several occasions that we want the elections to be held as soon as possible, which is being interpreted in Bangladesh that the U.S. is trying to put pressure on the government.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The goal has to be clear. I mean, what I'm saying is exactly what our Ambassador has said, because I talked to her about ten days ago and we -- I think we got our stories straight. The goal that we have in mind is a timeline to get back to elections, and that should be a timeline that doesn't drag it out but rather accomplishes the things that need to be done as soon as possible to get back to elections. But we're not specifying a time. We're specifying a timeline, that there has to be a way of building -- doing the things that need to be done but getting to an election. And that's what -- we want to see that kind of program more than anything else.

QUESTION: Kahlid Hasan, Daily Times of Lahore. My questions have been asked by my distinguished colleagues so I will merely --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So let's just talk about --

QUESTION: But I have a question, which is yesterday you held a special briefing on Pakistan and Afghanistan and no Pakistani correspondent was invited, so I want to know why.

Number two, you know that we from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, we work against a time disadvantage of nine to ten hours, which means that in the morning -- I mean, whenever we phone the State Department number, we can never get anybody, or if we get somebody that somebody doesn't know and they say we'll call back, and then they call back, either they don't call back or when they call back it's too late for us. So I would urge you to please do something about this. This is a feeling which all of my colleagues share and it's not a very good situation. I'm sorry.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, on the question of deadlines, you know, I understand. I hate to -- I know we work on different cycles. You probably get phone calls at 4 in the morning a lot more often than we do, but we -- same thing. When they wake up out there, they start calling us and they want things done by the end of their day. So I understand the problem. I can't do much for you. I can just tell you that we'll try to keep it in mind and try to be responsive, more responsive, earlier in the day.

As far as the people who I talked to yesterday, I talked to people who are over in our building and wanted to, you know -- I thought it was nice to see them because they work over there, and then I wanted to come over here and see you because a lot of you work over here or in this vicinity. So I'm just making the rounds. I saw some people yesterday and other people today. Actually, I don't have any plans for tomorrow, but I guess we're open to further requests.

QUESTION: Sridhar Krishnaswami from Press Trust of India. Can you give us an update on the 1-2-3 talks between the U.S. and India given that the next round is going to be held this week in Delhi?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I thought I was going to be able to tell you, we have a team going out there for talks starting this weekend in Delhi. We've had a lot of back and forth. We had a couple rounds with the Indians before. We've, I think, gone pretty thoroughly through all the concepts involved. We had some detailed talks when our team went out in December and then we had Foreign Secretary Menon here -- well, Foreign Secretary Saran here, Foreign Secretary Menon here, and have gone through a lot of the key elements with that. So there's a pretty good understanding of things that we have to deal with and even some understandings on how we might move forward. I think now the attempt is going to be to really focus on getting as much of the text done as possible and seeing how far we can get. But we've built a solid basis of understanding to move forward so I think we're hopeful that with effort from both sides we can get a lot of this settled in the next round.

MODERATOR: We have a question from New York. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hello. Moinuddin Nasar - from Bangladesh again (inaudible) Holiday. I want to ask whether Bangladesh will continue to receive economic, political and all other support until holding of elections, after cleaning up the political enmities and corruption?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Very much. I think our interest in Bangladesh is a long-term one. We've been there for a long time. We've worked with Bangladesh on a whole variety of ways. We've helped consistently over the years with economic growth, with healthcare, with education. We've emphasized I think very much democracy and the fight against terrorism as well, and have significant programs in both those areas. Those are long-term things. Obviously, we provide support to the election commission and others who are preparing a new election. But working on all these areas: education, health, economic growth, democracy, these are long-term things. I don't have off the top of my head the new budget numbers, but I think you'll see that reflected in the upcoming budget years that the United States is going to stick with it, with Bangladesh as we proceed to another election and into a new government.

QUESTION: K.P. Nayar from The Telegraph. First of all, I would like to correct Arshad's lapse and address you, Senior Administrative Official. He dropped "Senior."

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, he's a senior journalist in Bangladesh, so I won't forget to drop that. Yeah. Anyway.

QUESTION: When we go to Capitol Hill, we hear comments about General Musharraf and Pakistan that go well beyond your circumspect remarks today and that the public appearances and briefings. It's the same when you go to think tank meetings on Pakistan or if you read the op-ed pages of America's Fourth Estate. So my question is is there a disconnect between the Administration's view on General Musharraf and Pakistan and what the rest of America and the American people think about Pakistan?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: You know, I think to answer a question like that, you have to look at what the administrations have done, different parties over the years, what the Congress has done, different parties, different members over the years, and what the American people have supported with their tax dollars, with their votes and others. And I think that's to have a solid relationship with Pakistan, to work with Pakistan as an ally in the war on terror, to work with Pakistan as a place where democracies are important to us, to work with Pakistan as an economic and trading partner, with investments, with imports from Pakistan, to work with Pakistan as a partner with education, where we've put a lot of our aid money into education. There's all kinds of programs back and forth between American universities, American people and Pakistani universities, Pakistani people. So I think over the years, we've had a very consistent interest in Pakistan.

Our interest is in the success of Pakistan as a nation, the success of Pakistan as a moderate Muslim, open, prosperous, democratic society, and that's what we have tried to sustain over the years and I think that's what we're doing now. And our Congress has supported that kind of funding as we've gone forward.

Now, you're going to hear a lot of different views in the United States, absolutely. You'll hear everything under the sun said about anything under the sun. That's democracy. And you know, I'm part of the debate. I get into it sometimes. I discuss Pakistan with lots of people who don't agree with me and I don't agree with them. But that's the democratic process, too. And in the end, what does it produce? I think it produced a very consistent and sustained U.S. policy to work with Pakistan as an important nation, as a promising nation, as a good partner in any variety of areas, and that we've done that consistently over the years and will do it consistently for years to come.

I think we've probably got to do two more and then we'll --

QUESTION: Navbahor Imanova from Voice of America's Uzbek service. Regarding Turkmenistan, we know that you've been there a quite a few times since the political changes in Ashkabad.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Twice. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: And we believe you are going there soon.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No specific plans, but I'm sure I'll go back, yeah.

QUESTION: Well, how would you define the current regime and how closely the United States is working with this administration?

The second question is about Uzbekistan. President Karimov -- Islam Karimov's term has recently expired, but we don't know if or when the elections, you know, will take place this year. How does the United States see the situation?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I've been to Turkmenistan twice since December, but my deputy Evan A. Feigenbaum has been there. Another principal

deputy, Steve Mann's been there. We've had a delegation of assistance -- people who run our various exchange and assistance programs. We've started to put together a series of delegations to deal more specifically in a number of topics, a number of subject areas: education and health; economics, business and agriculture; security cooperation; counternarcotics, counterterrorism, border security, things like that -- I should have brought my list; political reform and human rights, and -- oh, yeah, energy opportunities. And so we'll have more specific delegations go out.

So I guess that kind of characterizes where we think we are with Turkmenistan. We're hopeful. We're interested in working with them. You know, when we had -- at the funeral for President Niyazov, I brought a letter from the Secretary that basically said we're ready for a new beginning if you're interested in change. And so we've seen a lot of change in Turkmenistan. We've seen extension of school year, we've seen internet cafes, we've seen a lot of things start happening in terms of interest in education, scholarship programs, those kind of areas. So we're hopeful. We're hopeful that that will lead somewhere.

But there's a lot to do and a long way to go. I think the new leadership recognizes that. We're happy to work with them. We're happy to work with them as long as they're willing to proceed down that road of offering their people the kind of opportunities that they deserve. The benefits of the oil and gas wealth that the nation has need to go to the people. The benefits of Turkmenistan's position, rich history, culture, tradition need to go to the people so that they can have the education they deserve, the economic opportunity they deserve, the position in the region that they deserve. Yeah.

And Uzbekistan -- you know, I haven't -- I frankly haven't paid that much attention to the Uzbekistan constitution and the election process. I don't hold out much hope that that would give the people of Uzbekistan much of a choice under current circumstances. And so I don't think we've really worried too much about it. It's unfortunate, but there is no semblance of democracy in Uzbekistan. When we talk to them about a comprehensive relationship, we always include democracy, human rights and political reform. And, frankly, they do, too. If you look at the joint statements that we've signed over the years, that's always been a key component.

But frankly, like so many other areas of the relationship, they've made it difficult to work in that area. They've made it difficult to work in the economic area in the way that they've closed down businesses, basically taking over their assets. They've made it difficult to work for educational exchanges. They won't let students go abroad to study. I mean, this is -- you can't do much no matter how many communiqués there are or statements they make. But we're very consistent in pushing for respect for human rights, but what needs to be done in Uzbekistan is still pretty basic now: respect the people, don't arrest them, let them form nongovernmental groups, let them start to have a say in their own future. That's where we're pushing.

MODERATOR: A question from New York? The last one.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Last one from New York. Okay.

QUESTION: Good afternoon. I'm Shehabuddin Kisslu from Probe news. I would like to get your words, but are there any words of commitments to eliminate the (inaudible) terrorist network in Bangladesh?

And secondly, that in your views, how do you see the Rohingya problem in Bangladesh, especially considering the latest recent situation in Myanmar and Bangladesh border?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: On the second half, the Rohingya problem, I'm going to have to deal with that separately. I've got to go back and look at the situation. Frankly, I'm not familiar personally with the latest developments, so I better make sure I look at that before I give you some grand pronouncement on the subject.

As far as eliminating the terrorist networks in Bangladesh, this is truly a priority, I think, for all of us. We don't want to see Bangladesh fall prey to the violence and political extremism that have inflicted other countries. I think we were all shocked in August of 2005 when all those bombs went off, 400-some bombs, and we all felt that it demonstrated -- and I think the government has responded -- it demonstrated that there needed to be a bigger response and more vigilant effort. The people of Bangladesh have accomplished an awful lot, accomplished an awful lot in their economy, accomplished an awful lot in their society and accomplished over the years an awful lot in their democracy. And to have that kind of violence persist in this country will only harm the people at large and harm what they've achieved and what they're trying to achieve.

So we have very active antiterrorism cooperation. There are people in our Embassy that specialize in that and work closely with the Bangladesh Government, whichever government or caretaker it is. We have done a lot of training courses and exchanged information, so we try to help in a whole variety of ways to make sure that they can deal successful with a terrorist threat to Bangladesh.

All right. Thanks very much, everybody. I appreciate it.



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