



Roundtable With East-West Center Journalists Tour

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

Remarks to the Press
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ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Good to see you all. Welcome. When did you all arrive? This weekend?

QUESTION: Friday.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Friday. So you probably feel the way I do. I came in Friday, not too late in the morning, from Sri Lanka and Maldives. All I can tell you is it's a long way. You guys know that.

QUESTION: We went on the 7th of May -- or 6th of May in the United States, but in Washington it was only Friday and I'm --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Yeah, okay. So you may be over the jet lag a little bit. My family complains; I always come home and it's nice to have me home, but then I fall asleep at 8 o'clock at night. That's pretty much what's been happening to me. Anyway, it's a good thing. I'm awake in the mornings, the way it works out. Let's just -- let's start.

I handle -- I work on a region from India -- actually, Maldives is the farthest south, to Kazakhstan. And one of the regions -- one of the reasons why there is such a bureaucratic division in the State Department is because the Secretary of State has really looked at this area and said this has the potential of becoming a region of stability along -- you might call it a backbone of stability -- from India to Kazakhstan. That is, it's a new opportunity because for the last several hundred years, Afghanistan has been an obstacle. It's been a block between Central and South Asia.

And if you go back before that in history, you find Afghanistan was actually a conduit, it was a hub, it was a place where things moved; ideas, empires, people, goods. And what we would like to see is for Afghanistan to sort of resume that position, to be able to help South and Central Asia interact with each other, and help with the flow of goods and people and ideas and energy supplies.

And to achieve that, you have to achieve a sense of stability throughout this region based on democracy because, fundamentally, it is a region of democracy. Each of the countries, however difficult and troubled democracy has been, has had a commitment to democracy one way or the other. So we talk about democratic stability, democratic stability in South and Central Asia as well, where the countries aspire to the OSCE standards and European traditions.

Achieving that goal over the long term requires stabilization in each of the countries dealing with conflicts, dealing with terrorism, drugs, a lot of real serious problems. And we're doing that, I think, everywhere, but especially in Afghanistan. And we're fighting a radical, determined enemy in Afghanistan. The Taliban have regrouped last year and came back with more force, but I think you see us dealing with them effectively this year because, essentially, we do have the resources, we do have a commitment from us and the Afghan Government.

A lot's been achieved in Afghanistan. There's almost 6 million kids who go to school now compared to 900,000 under the Taliban; 40 percent of those kids are girls. We've had a national government established by elections and the democratic process. We have over 3,000 kilometers of road, including the ring road, which sort of unites the nation for the first time in a long time.

And there's stability in much of the country. Fighting is concentrated in the south. We've had some successes. You saw the news today that Mullah Dadullah Lang, senior Taliban commander, was killed; and that's important. He was the major operational commander. There have been a number, I'd say -- I can think of three of the five or six senior Taliban leaders. Three of them have been eliminated in the last several months this year. Two were killed in Afghanistan, one was arrested in Pakistan.

And so we are continuing to help the government push out, extend itself to all parts of the country. That involves training police, training military, providing roads, providing electricity. And the government this year has more roads, more police, more aid projects, more government agents, more NATO troops, more electricity, more irrigation projects, more capability than it has ever before, and certainly than it did last year. And as we face this Taliban enemy, I think you see that they are under pressure from all sides, including from Pakistan.

It's not completely smooth progress. We've obviously had problems and incidents. The Taliban are, unfortunately, carrying out suicide bombings, which is a nasty tactic and really just kills civilians. It doesn't achieve anything. Last year, they tried to take territory in towns and cities, and they failed. This year, it seems all they want to do is kill people. It's going to take a long time to eliminate that because you have to get real and full control of all the territory, but we're working on it and we're headed in that direction. But it's going to take a longer time to do that.

We had, unfortunately, over the weekend, some skirmishes, some shootings across the Pak and Afghan border. This is very regrettable. It's very serious. We think today we had news that there might have been some Americans who went up there to help work things out and were shot at, including some who were injured, maybe one killed. It's a very serious matter and we're going to talk very strongly with both sides that they have to stop this; this is ridiculous. We all know who the enemy is and we all need to go after them and not get involved in these skirmishes between each other. So we're going to be taking that matter up today with both sides. Actually, we've already taken it up, but we'll do it more today.

But other than that, I think generally, you know, we're on a positive trend. As I said, the government is expanding throughout the country. The Taliban are under pressure from all sides. But part of stabilizing Afghanistan is so we can open up these connections, these connections between India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan. It is the route that energy and other things should be flowing, so we can open up educational opportunity to children throughout the region and so we can stabilize the whole region on the basis of democratic principles, but also economic opportunity, fighting poverty; and helping countries not only fight terrorism but make themselves more healthy and more immune to problems like terrorism and drugs and corruption and turmoil.

Anyway, that's where I will stop. We can talk about any of this in more detail, but I thought I would give you a sense of why this region matters to us and what it's about for us in a bigger sense.

QUESTION: Sir, you talked about your achievements, but if you're going back to the (inaudible) 2001 when the Taliban were toppled. It was an understanding that Taliban have gone and the basic purpose of these attacks on (inaudible) and poppy cultivation just to bring security to the region. But with -- and Taliban (inaudible) to stop the process of Talibanization. But after five years have gone, we see that still the problems exists because Osama is still alive, and then the poppy cultivation is on the rise, especially in southern Afghanistan, and then the Taliban are emerging, reemerging and regrouping again in a powerful way, because we see suicide bombings

that they are on the rise, and if you compare this year with the last year it is on the rise. So how would --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't think that's quite true, but -- I mean it may be, but I don't think it's true yet. I think you started out right. After we went into Afghanistan and established the government, the Taliban were gone. And it's true, but where did they go? I mean, that's the question. They weren't really eliminated. They were kicked out, and they were able to find places to regroup along the Pakistan-Afghan border, probably on both sides, that weren't firmly under government control. And the whole process of establishing a national government, building the sort of basic infrastructure of the ring road, building the school zone, meant that the government didn't really get out and establish control throughout the country. And in those places, particularly in the south where they didn't have firm control, or various parts of Pakistan where the Pakistan Government didn't have firm control, that's where the Taliban were able to reorganize and regroup.

I'm not surprised you can't find one individual. I mean, I don't know if you've been up to that area, but you just look at the mountains and look at the circumstances, look at the history, and you realize it's a place where people can hide. So yes, one person can hide up there for some time. Eventually, I think we'll find him.

But the process of getting government control of these areas from both sides of the border, from the Pakistani side and the Afghan side, is still underway. And that's the way to eliminate the Taliban, to keep them from becoming a force ever again. And I'd say that's what's going on. So yeah, they were gone, but they weren't finished. And now we've got to establish firm enough government control throughout the territory on both sides that they can't come back again.

QUESTION: Are you comfortable with what the Pakistani Government is doing with you?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I'm comfortable the Pakistani Government has done a lot to keep the pressure up and to actually impose more pressure on the foreign fighters and the Taliban and the others who are out there.

QUESTION: Sir, it's known, well now that the Bangladeshi -- Bangladesh is now, you know, is running by a quasi-military government, kind of, and there is a popular perception that they're enjoying American blessings out there, because America is interested to -- you know, in our coal mine and gas line and, you know, the sea port and --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: That's silly, actually. I mean, if that's what people think, I'm afraid they're just wrong.

QUESTION: A statement of people --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: We're interested in stability in Bangladesh. We're interested in having a good partner in Bangladesh. We're interested in the two things we've always worked on in Bangladesh: One is promoting democracy, and the second is helping them fight terrorism. I'd say the third one is developing the nation. Bangladesh has done pretty well economically in the past few years, but they've had a lot of political trouble and political turmoil. This government is a caretaker government. It's important to remember that because the role of the caretaker government is to have an election, is to get to an election, a fair, free, open election that gives the people of Bangladesh a choice.

And they've had a lot of political problems in Bangladesh. This government has vowed to clean up those problems, and get back to an election. But the only purpose -- the chief, the only goal this government can have is to have an election. And their duty to the world and their duty to the people of Bangladesh is to lay out a timeline of how they're going to get to elections, the steps they're going to take to get there, and to have an election in a timely manner. And that's what we're looking for.

So we've certainly said we understand there's much to do to prepare a free and fair election in Bangladesh. But you can't drag out this process too long. You have to set a time period and you have to set a timetable that says here are the steps we're going to take to get to an election, because that's the only duty a caretaker government has. It has no legitimacy other than moving it back to an election, and that's what we expect.

And that's -- we've been pretty clear. I've been clear in my meetings and the Ambassador* has been very clear in her statements that we expect Bangladesh to return to a democracy through elections in a clear manner.

Sir.

QUESTION: Are you aware that Pakistani soil has been used to create terrorism not only in India and Kashmir, but also in cities like Bombay, (inaudible) and Pakistan has been a safe haven for at least 30 terrorists wanted by Indian Government (inaudible bombing in '93 and subsequently other bombings)?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Well, if you're going to accuse every country -- I mean, there are terrorists in India. Look at the Mumbai bombings. Look at the train bombings.

QUESTION: Yeah, but --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: They were local people and there were people with connections to other places, including Pakistan.

QUESTION: Yeah, but the kingpin is always Pakistan.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: No, I -- I don't think that's completely true, frankly.

QUESTION: India --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I'm not here to have an argument. If you want to ask me a question, I'll give you the answer, okay? There are terrorist groups that originated in Pakistan that are operating throughout the region. Some of those groups are now banned in Pakistan. Some of those groups have tried to assassinate President Musharraf as well as other people throughout the region. The fact is, you know, this is not a gang from one country to another. This is not an accusation from one country to another. These terrorists are operating and attacking governments throughout the region and particularly India and Pakistan. India and Pakistan have recognized that they have a common problem. They need to find common solutions. That's why they have a mechanism to work together against terrorism. We think that's good development. We're against terrorists. We're with India against terrorists. We're with Pakistan against terrorists, and we all have to work together if we're going to stop it. That's our view of the situation.

QUESTION: Just one last thing. (Inaudible) I think it is (inaudible) global terrorism is supposed to ally with Al Qaeda. So I think even U.S. (inaudible) and appears to have evidence of his being in Pakistan.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I don't know if that's true. I mean, I do know that Daud Ibrahim is a bad guy, and we deserve to get him, but we all have to work together. Yes?

QUESTION: How far are you confident that that India will be able to complete the nuclear deal, the U.S. nuclear deal?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I'm pretty confident. We had some good talks a couple of weeks ago when Foreign Secretary Menon was here. I think we went

through things quite thoroughly and made some real significant progress. We're trying to get back together as soon as we know we have a good basis for the next round to take it the next step forward. And so we're waiting to hear back from the Indian side right now, but I'm pretty confident that we're making the progress now that we had hoped to make, and that we'll be able to conclude this deal the way both sides want to.

QUESTION: Does the position of India Government, the Manmohan Singh government and (inaudible) minority is there view (inaudible) the parliament deliberate?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think, you know, we've done this from the beginning with the Prime Minister. The President and the Prime Minister reached agreement a long time ago. What we're trying to do is carry out what they've already agreed. Their political situation hasn't changed. The Prime Minister has been leading this process throughout. So I think the record so far shows that he can do this, and that he has been doing this successfully, and we're going to continue to work with him to achieve it.

QUESTION: The fact that there is (inaudible) some support of the leftist party in (inaudible).

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Again, it's been the same political situation for him since he started two years ago, almost two years ago when we did the July communiqué right? And he's carried out his commitment since then. His politics is something he works, but he's been able to deliver on his side. We've been able to deliver on our side. So the President and Prime Minister have committed to something and we're going to carry it out. I don't see any further impediments, any different circumstances for either one now than there were a couple of years ago when they started.

QUESTION: What is the main issue for U.S. in this South and Central Asia, just (inaudible) stability or economical issue?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: You know, it's hard to say because they're all combined. You know, if you talk about stability you have to have economic growth. If you talk about stability, you have to fight terrorism. If you talk about stability, you have to create participatory democratic societies, where people have a stake in it. You have to fight corruption. You have to fight -- you have to fight poverty. So, I think our main interest is to give people better prospects for the future; to give the people of the region real opportunities for their future, and that comes from all these things; having healthy, safe places for their children to grow up and get an education, get jobs, having access to modern technology, having a choice in who their leaders are and what their future is going to be. But it pretty much boils down to having people -- giving people opportunities for their future.

Sir?

QUESTION: Some of the Karzai government high officials I think are often attracted to this, especially (inaudible) in Kandahar. So do you think the United States will put pressure on the Afghan Government towards these people, and the next question is if U.S. decides to bomb or attack Iran nuclear facilities so that (inaudible)?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: On your second question, look, everything we've done with Iran has been diplomatic, okay? I'm not going to get into any wild-eyed contingencies, you know. If men were going to come from the moon, where would they land? I'm not going to do this. I'm not speculating on anything other -- but look at what we're doing with Iran? We're pursuing a diplomatic course. We've negotiated the nuclear issue with the Europeans and the United Nations Security Council. We've just, I think, come to agreement that we should have direct discussions on the questions of Iraq, and we'll do that in Baghdad.

So, you know, look what we're doing with Iran. We're working with other nations and we're working diplomatically. So I don't think there's any cause for speculation at this point on other things.

On the question of corruption in Afghanistan, it is a serious problem, and it's a problem that the Government needs to address and I think they are committed to address it. They have a serious attorney general, a serious supreme court. They're trying to go after this. We're working with them to go after the drug trafficking networks, and our basic view is anybody that's found -- anybody against whom there's evidence. Anybody who deserves to be indicted and tried, will be indicted and tried; and there's no exceptions in our book. It doesn't matter who you are, how you're connected, what office you have. If you're involved in drugs and corruption, you should be subject to the full penalties of the law. That's our view, and I think that's the Afghan view as well. Prosecutions have not proceeded as quickly as we might have liked, but we're working on it.

QUESTION: The General Attorney does not done a good job. He just arrests a few people who are not important.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Look, I don't -- it's not for me to comment on the performance of other Government leaders. Other Government leaders have to decide who their people are on this, but I do think we have a commitment from the Afghan Government. We do have some good people there. I think, you know, our goal is to help the Afghan Government pursue corruption and drug trafficking wherever it leads, and that's what we'll do.

QUESTION: Just one more question.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I think I probably have time for one or two more, so okay.

QUESTION: So you're just looking everywhere in the world for democratic partners. But I see my country was supporting a military dictator, so --

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Are you talking about Pakistan?

QUESTION: Yeah, yeah.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Okay.

QUESTION: So it's time for him to go as the elections have gotten closer. How do you see his future prospects?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: I mean his political prospects are for the Pakistani people to decide. What we know is that he has -- President Musharraf has made a commitment to have elections. He's made a commitment, and has acted to move Pakistan on a moderate course of a moderate society based on democratic processes. And I think that's important to us because it's all part of the program, and so that's what we're supporting, the whole program that President Musharraf put in place. We worked with him on all aspects of this. We definitely are supporting an election this year. We're supporting the election commission. We're supporting the election process. Ultimately, the Pakistani people deserve a fair chance to choose their leadership. How any particular leader will fair in the elections is for them to decide, not for us.

All right, I have to run. Good to meet you. You're here for a week, two weeks? Three?

QUESTION: No, we're only here until Wednesday, then we're going to New York City, then we're going to Detroit where there's a very large Muslim-American (inaudible).

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: Good.

QUESTION: Then back to Honolulu to meet their American colleagues for (inaudible), Jakarta and then going to (inaudible).

ASSISTANT SECRETARY BOUCHER: That'll be interesting; that'll be interesting to see what they think and what you think, when you get back. Also, Honolulu is not a bad place.

(Laughter)

Anyway, have a good trip. I hope it's interesting to you, and it's nice to meet you all.

[↑](#) Ambassador Butenis

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