



## Press Roundtable in Afghanistan

**John D. Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State**

Kabul, Afghanistan  
September 11, 2007

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** Good afternoon everybody.

I'd like to read a very brief statement before taking some of your questions.

I'm delighted to be here in Afghanistan. I've had the opportunity to meet with President Karzai, with Foreign Minister Spanta and National Security Advisor Rassoul. I traveled east to Jalalabad this morning and also throughout Kabul and I'm encouraged by the vibrance and the energy I have seen here. I've been impressed by the dedication and the efforts of the Afghan people, Afghan officials, the members of NATO, and the international donor community.

Today's date has profound significance. This morning I stood at the flag pole here at the United States Embassy and led a service in memory of the victims of 9/11. Beside the flag pole there is a plaque beneath which is interred a portion of the rubble from the site of that tragedy -- a constant reminder of one of the reasons we are here in Afghanistan. But our efforts in Afghanistan have never been about malice or about revenge. They are about making the world safe from intimidation, fear, and brutality. That is why we are here with 37 other nations who contribute to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and that is why the international community has combined to provide over \$17 billion in international assistance.

Preventing the recurrence of another horrific attack like the one we remember today is the reason we arrived in Afghanistan. But we remain here to help the Afghan people chart a new future of stability, prosperity, and peace.

With the combined efforts of the Afghan people and the international community, we are making impressive strides towards that vision, and the opportunities are diminishing for those who would bring Afghanistan back to the days of oppression, fear and death.

Defeating an insurgency increasingly fueled by the narcotics trade is a painstaking process, but progress is being made and we will not abandon the people of Afghanistan to the likes of the Taliban and al-Qaida.

With improved security, prosperity and social development, there are fewer places that the Taliban can look to for safe haven. The Afghan government is leading the nation towards a new future and we will support that effort.

So while we remember the events of this day six years ago with sorrow, we can measure the progress we have made here since then and look ahead with optimism to the future.

That concludes my opening statement and I'd be pleased to answer your questions.

**QUESTION:** The Foreign Minister in an interview today said that Osama bin Laden is not in Afghanistan. The Afghans says he is not here, and Pakistan says he is also not in Pakistan. I wonder if you view Foreign Minister Spanta's statement as correct, and/or what the U.S. position is on where bin Laden might be.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** I don't think we know where bin Laden is. I think our best assessment is that he is still alive and that he is somewhere in the Pakistan/Afghanistan border area. But since you've asked the question, I think I would also make the point that wherever he is, he is hiding. He and his close associate, Mr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. That is a very different situation from the one that prevailed prior to September 11, 2001 when he had completely free use and access to and free reign in the country of Afghanistan. That situation has been changed and that, needless to say, was a very, very important change for the better.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, you still talk about international cooperation when NATO has repeatedly called for more member countries to meet their international commitments, and no one seems to want to work in Helmand Province when the British start to pull out. Also, we have had more than 100 suicide bombings in the past eight months of this year compared to 120 for the entire period of last year. The Taliban claim a resurgence in the south, they claim they are taking portions in the north. Only yesterday there was a bombing with 27 dead, and there were 500 dead policemen in the last five months. Is that really progress?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** Well, if you look first of all, we're talking about September 11, 2001 and the situation that existed beforehand. If you think of it in those terms, today this country is governed by a democratic government which controls the capital of this country and all the provinces. Its writ extends throughout most of the country.

It is true that there are some parts of the country which are contested with the Taliban, but I think that as the international effort continues, and I believe it will continue, and I believe that NATO will continue providing forces to the ISAF, and the Afghan forces, the Afghan government increases its capabilities, and I think there's been a significant increase in those capabilities in the past couple of years, particularly with regard to the Afghan Army, I think you're going to see those situations brought under control.

Lastly, I think I'm also hopeful that there is going to be improved communication and cooperation between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan with respect to the border areas, and I think that also can have a positive impact on the situation.

**QUESTION:** Poppy cultivation is one of the biggest problems in this country. Can you talk eradication, especially about maybe spraying? And [inaudible] NATO nations are not willing to take up the fight against opium production. They say that is not in their mandate. Will you be pushing for [inaudible]?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** First of all, in reply to the first part of your question, yes, it was a subject that I discussed while I was here, including with President Karzai. He told me that he was supportive of the drug eradication and that he was fully committed to that. I also had an opportunity in my visit to Jalalabad to discuss the issue of proper eradication with representatives of our provincial reconstruction team.

As far as the specific mandate for eradication is concerned, there are specialized units for that purpose in the Afghan government, and that's probably where that responsibility ought to be lodged, although there are many different supporting elements that could be provided by the international community such as intelligence, for example.

**QUESTION:** President Karzai has expressed concerns about the Taliban getting sophisticated weapons, Chinese made weapons, including surface-to-air missiles. And

the U.S. spoke with China last week and it was raised. Is this something that was brought up today and is it of great concern to the U.S. that these weapons [find their way here]? And on the other border, do you see Iranian fingerprints on weapons coming into Afghanistan?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** On your first question, it's not a subject that I discussed on this visit. That is not to say that it might not be occurring. But one thing I would say with regard to China is that a subject that I have discussed with the Chinese in the past is the fact of their weapons sales to the country of Iran and our concern about those weapon sales. We have tried to discourage the Chinese from signing any new weapons contracts with Iran.

In regard to the second point, yes, we are concerned by reports which we consider to be reliable of explosively formed projectiles and other kinds of military equipment coming from Iran across the border and coming into the hands of the Taliban. That is a source of concern to us.

**QUESTION:** A question regarding the possible talks with the Taliban. President Karzai had offered peace talks with the Taliban and recently the Taliban spokesperson, he also showed the group's readiness for talks with the Afghan government. If such a thing happens I want to know the U.S. government's position or stance on this. Will you support this idea or not?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** Let me say three things about that. First of all, there have been these reports about the Taliban's interest in talking and I think we all need to understand a little bit better what is being suggested because there is contradictory information about exactly what is being proposed. That would be my first point.

Secondly, we would want to know the view of the government of Afghanistan.

Thirdly, we would, whatever happens, we would think that this proposal for talks by the Taliban should be handled in such a way by the government of Afghanistan that it does not in any way undermine or prejudice all the important political and social and economic accomplishments that have occurred in this country since September 11, 2001.

**QUESTION:** I wanted to ask you about [Afghan Foreign Minister] Mr. Spanta. You said you met with him earlier today. As you probably know, there is a lot of debate right now about whether Mr. Spanta should stay Foreign Minister, with the Parliament threatening to shut down if the President doesn't sack him, and the President backing him to the country's Supreme Court. I wanted to get your impressions of Mr. Spanta and whether you're backing the President on this or the Parliament, or what your thoughts are.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** In the case of Mr. Spanta, he attended the meeting, he was present at the meeting I had with President Karzai yesterday, but we did not really have any extensive exchange between us directly. The conversation was entirely with President Karzai.

As far as his status of Foreign Minister, that is the position he occupies at the moment and the basis on which we deal with Foreign Minister Spanta. The question of whether he continues or not to occupy that position is entirely a matter for the government of Afghanistan to decide.

**QUESTION:** The government being the President and Parliament. I'm just wondering --

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** As I say, this is something that they will have to decide and we will respect whatever decision is reached.

**QUESTION:** Two questions. One is a follow-up to the question of the possible talks with the Taliban. I want to know exactly what would be the U.S. government position on this, assuming this happens. And Mullah Omar is on your black list, so if this happens what will happen to him?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** You're asking me a hypothetical question there, and I think I've really covered, I've said all I'm prepared to say on the subject at the moment. It will depend on, these things would depend first of all on exactly what the suggestion is, it would depend on what the government of Afghanistan thinks, and only then could one reach some kind of an opinion as to the merits of this suggestion.

**QUESTION:** A second question, on the distribution of the soccer balls in the Khost Province. Some of the Jihadi leaders, Saudi flags. Jihadi leaders and members of the Parliament, they said that if the U.S. troops continue to disrespect the --

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** I'm afraid I don't know anything about that issue, I'm sorry.

**QUESTION:** I was [inaudible] proposal [inaudible]?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** Plans for a?

**QUESTION:** A pipeline.

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** Oil or -- No, we didn't. There's a plan that's been on the books for a long time. Turkmenistan, Afghanistan [inaudible].

**QUESTION:** [Inaudible] India?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** But that's a gas pipeline, isn't it? Not oil. Sorry, I heard oil.

**QUESTION:** Or if you could [inaudible].

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** I've been aware of that proposal for it must be 12 or 13 years. It's been around for a long time, since the mid '90s, and I think it's always been plagued by complications. I'm not aware that it has advanced at all recently, although some day under the right conditions this would be a highly desirable thing, if gas from Turkmenistan could be exported through South Asia.

**QUESTION:** Again, a hypothetical question --

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** The Taliban question. I heard Taliban. [Laughter].

**QUESTION:** He said can you exactly tell us what would be the U.S. government's stance on this?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** I'm not going to say anything more than I've said.

Last question.

**QUESTION:** Talk about the differences of approach, the U.S. and British approaches, to fighting the Taliban. The U.S. taking a heavy firepower approach perhaps, four civilian deaths; a former British officer saying every civilian killed is another five Taliban recruited. Can you give us your take on that?

**DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE:** I think the force principally responsible, of course, for civilian casualties is the Taliban itself. They use civilians and civilian casualties as a political instrument. They deliberately draw conflict into civilian areas or use civilian shields. So I think it is they who bear the responsibility for the preponderance of civilian casualties that occur in the country.

As far as the United States is concerned, we certainly do everything we can to avoid civilian casualties and in light of some of the recent discussion and controversy that has arisen, have taken steps to review our procedures and our rules of engagement to ensure that we continue to do our utmost, and I know and am confident that we are doing our utmost, to avoid civilian casualties wherever possible.

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