



Why Helping Afghanistan Matters

Kurt Volker, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs

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As prepared

Hello, and thank you for that kind introduction. Earlier this week, I spoke at an engagement in Washington, and I was introduced by someone who works for me.

Now, it's embarrassing enough to be introduced as a speaker anywhere, because it is always an excessively kind, flattering, uncritical commentary that goes on, and on, and on. But it is especially embarrassing when it is someone who works for you, because the rest of the audience thinks you have put her up to it.

So while I am still overwhelmed by your kind words, at least I can tell the audience here, I didn't pay you for that.

It's also great to be in this country. The last time I was in Finland was at the start of your successful EU Presidency in 1999. I remember renting an apartment and blocking the windows with blankets, because the bright midsummer night's sunlight was keeping me and our 1 year old daughter awake. And I remember that she was fascinated by the ladybugs on the esplanade, and I remember a pleasant visit to Suomenlinna, with our daughter in a newly-acquired "Mummintroll" tee-shirt.



Well, it's clear that since that time, a lot has happened in Finland, and the United States. America has gone through the upheaval of the September 11 attacks--6 years and 3 days ago--and having passed from outrage to determination to the beginnings of a new optimism, it is still living through the consequences. At the same time, there is a new dynamism here in Finland, and an inspiring feeling is in the air. It is really wonderful to be here.

Finns have been tough and courageous throughout their history. You even have a special word for that which--I'm told--mixes the meaning of toughness, gumption, stick-to-itiveness, strength of will in the face of adversity, and has no exact translation: "*sisu*." Well, we may not quite have a word for this in the rest of the world, but we certainly recognize that Finns have *sisu*.

You've had to have strength and perseverance, wedged as you are between larger nations and facing at times some of the roughest tides of history. And yet Finland has prospered, and is contributing to the welfare, and security and development of the world at large.

Finnish citizens have made major contributions, for example, in Afghanistan. Finnish aid workers are helping the Afghan people build a new, stronger society. And Finnish soldiers have fought very bravely in Afghanistan to protect that emerging society.

One of your troops was killed in action, in May, while on patrol. As I represent a nation with many losses in Afghanistan and elsewhere, I share your anguish, and I extend our deepest condolences to you, and especially to the soldier's family. And I also offer our admiration to the other Finnish troops and civilian workers, who have shown resilience and perseverance in this vital mission.

Finland's military has no caveats on the use of its forces in Afghanistan--a model of flexibility for some of our NATO Allies as well as other partners. And, of course, beyond security contributions, Finland makes vital contributions of civilian expertise and aid to the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Mazar-e-Sharif, in the north of Afghanistan.

It is for this reason that I have come to Finland to speak about Afghanistan, where we are working together, shoulder to shoulder, to support a young fellow democracy and give hope to the Afghan people for a better future, a future without extremism and terror.

You understand that we are in Afghanistan for the right reasons--to help the Afghan people build their society--and that with a brutal foe like the Taliban, security is an essential component of development. Indeed, in today's world, security and development go hand-in-hand, and cannot be separated. This is something Finns and Americans alike understand.

Now, I know that there is a popular myth out there: one that says that Afghanistan is a lost cause; that NATO is failing; that this is an American war that doesn't matter to Europe; that the Taliban is winning; that civilian casualties are mounting; that Afghanistan is becoming a narco-state and that there is no long term plan. Pretty pessimistic stuff. Also pretty inaccurate. And, if I might add, grossly unfair to the Finnish and American soldiers and civilians on the ground, and indeed to the Afghan people themselves.

It is understandable how this myth grows and spreads. It gets reinforced by nightly news reports that show desperate acts by the Taliban and al-Qaeda--blowing up markets or schools, taking hostages, or besieging an ISAF patrol. The dangerous extremists we face know they cannot win in open battle, nor in an open debate of ideas. Society is not with them. So the only chance they have to succeed is through brutal and dramatic attacks that have no strategic value other than to create an impression of fear and failure. We must not be taken in.

In fact, let me start with a news flash: with our help, the Afghan people are winning. The increasing barbarism of the Taliban and al-Qaeda betrays only their desperation.

Today, I want to call your attention to a different picture of Afghanistan. One less driven by the horrible photos of a single brutal act, and one built on the efforts of several years of work by tens of thousands of Afghans, Americans, Europeans and others who are making a real difference in Afghanistan today.

I want to stress three broad themes:

First, the security and well-being of our societies--of all of us in the transatlantic community--depends on our success in Afghanistan. We must not allow the Taliban and al-Qaeda to re-impose their rule in Afghanistan and thus present a major long-term threat to people in that country and the surrounding region, to peace and stability in the region and the wider Middle East, and to our own societies.

Second, we must recognize that the hopes of the Afghan people for a long-term, stable, secure, more prosperous future depend on the assistance we can give them. We

are doing the right thing in Afghanistan, and we cannot turn our backs on the Afghan people and allow those who brutalized them before to return.

And third, we are actually producing solid results in Afghanistan and, ultimately, can succeed. This is not an effort in vain, but a good investment in Afghanistan, in our own societies, and in the world.

Let me start with the first point: that our well-being depends upon what we do in Afghanistan. It's important that we start with the security and well-being of our own societies--not because we are selfish, but because we are democracies, and that is what our voters demand.

Now, when I talk about security I am not referring to some abstract concept, to a subject treated in army field manuals or studied in graduate courses where they make you read Clausewitz. No, I'm talking about the security of your children, their safety as they go back and forth from home to school. The security of our homes here in Helsinki or Paris, New York and London.

I have three particular things in mind when I speak about our domestic security: drugs, regional instability, and the export of violent ideological extremism and terrorism.

Afghanistan is the number one supplier of opium and heroine to Europe, bar none. As opium production has risen in Afghanistan, it increasingly impacts the young people of Europe, sowing addiction, disease and death, and draining Europe's economic resources.

Opiate overdose is one of the leading causes of death among the young people in Europe, particularly among urban males. Germany alone had more than 1,385 overdoses last year. A recent German study noted that the combined public and insurer cost of treating addiction exceeds 540 million euros a year. In France, the Netherlands, U.K., Italy, Germany, and Austria, opiates account for more than 50% of admissions for addiction treatment.

This is a modern plague among the young people of Europe, and it illustrates how tackling the narcotics problem in Afghanistan can directly impact the health and well-being of Europeans.

As a nation including Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbeks and other ethnic groups (and tribes within those), Afghanistan has the potential to become a factor for regional stability and integration--or to become a victim of larger neighbors and a touchstone for wider instability and conflict. Refugee flows, smuggling, extremist exploitation and other serious concerns can be tackled on the borders of Afghanistan, or they can spread out from those border regions. By placing our bets on the future of Afghanistan, we are placing our bets on a more stable, secure, and ultimately prosperous region.

We have to remember that we've already seen what can happen when Afghanistan becomes a failed state and a haven for terrorists--the export of violent extremism. This was Afghanistan under the Taliban, where not only was there brutal repression at home, but there was an open door for al Qaeda, using Afghan territory and facilities, to train thousand of extremists and terrorists.

Although we've made substantial progress in eliminating places al Qaeda can call home, the simple truth is that this terrorist group is still out there, and still dangerous to people of good will, whether in Afghanistan, the wider region, Europe, or America.

When I say I am talking about the security of average Europeans, I mean it. Al Qaeda is looking increasingly to Europe for opportunities to attack. The Madrid train bombings of March 2004, which killed 119 and wounded more than 600, were undertaken by the Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigade, better known as the Secret Organization of al-Qaeda in Europe. The London bombings of July 2005, which left 52 dead and more than 770 injured, also could be traced to this group.

The recent efforts of Europe's law enforcement agencies against al Qaeda operatives have demonstrated that the Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigade has used the Afghan-Pakistani border area for training in these European attacks.

But let's also remember that the principal victims of al Qaeda killings have been other Moslems. Unlike NATO, Finland, and others in ISAF--al Qaeda and the Taliban deliberately target innocent civilians, whether villagers or aid workers. They kill women, children and the innocent indiscriminately. Whereas we go to extraordinary lengths to try to avoid civilian casualties, they deliberately put civilians in harms way--not as human shields but as human victims for purposes of media exploitation. The cynicism is boundless.

We have a long term, wider struggle with the issue of violent extremism, and groups like al Qaeda. But we also have a critical interest in not allowing groups like the Taliban or al Qaeda to reassert control in Afghanistan and exploit that country for the export of violence and violent ideology in the region, the broader Middle East, and our own societies.

So that's point one: our own security and well-being depends on what we do in Afghanistan.

My second message is that our help is vital to the Afghan people--whether from the perspective of humanitarian assistance, reconstruction and development, or pure and simple security from a brutal attacker.

We cannot abandon Afghanistan's 31 million people to the likes of the Taliban and al-Qaeda ever again. We cannot live with the shame of giving people hope, and then walking away and leaving them at the hands of their oppressors. We are doing the right thing in Afghanistan, and we shouldn't turn back.

There is the humanitarian aspect. From the time of the Soviet invasion in 1979 until 2001, Afghans constituted the world's single largest refugee group. With more than 6 million refugees around the world, Afghans were the single largest draw on the resources of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. In December 2000, the UNHCR noted that more than 5 million Afghan refugees depended on humanitarian assistance to survive and more than 3.8 million relied on the World Food Program for the daily sustenance.

Today, that story has turned around. According to the UNHCR, more than 4 million Afghan refugees have returned home since 2002. And the homecomings continue. The BBC recently reported that more than 100,000 Afghan refugees returned home this past summer.

To be sure, there are challenges facing many of these returnees--some of whom have not been in Afghanistan for a quarter century. But, there is a rapidly growing economy, and there is hope. Having alleviated the immense suffering of millions, we should not now stop half-way, and allow that humanitarian disaster to reappear.

Another aspect is the reconstruction and development of the nation. We need to remember what we saw when the Taliban ran Afghanistan: a violent, repressive regime that stoned women to death, lashed men for not praying sufficient times per day and barred girls from attending schools. This leadership banned kite flying and the singing of songs, and blew up ancient monuments that had survived Alexander, Ghengis Khan and Timurlame. It was a war-shattered country with a brutal regime that had no hope of progress.

In 2001, 8 percent of Afghans had access to some form of healthcare; now with over 670 hospitals and clinics built and outfitted, more than 80 percent of the population has access to medical care. Almost 11,000 doctors, midwives, and nurses have been trained.

In 2001, when we went into Afghanistan and liberated it from the Taliban and al Qaeda, only some 900,000 children were enrolled in school. Today there are more than 5 million students in that country. More than 1.5 million of them are girls. We know the exact number of girls were in school in 2001 because that number was Zero.

Since 2001, there's been a 24 percent decline in mortality rates for infants and children under 5, saving 85,000 young lives every year; More than 70 percent of the population--including 7 million children--have been inoculated against polio as opposed to just 35 percent 2 years ago.

And the progress we have made cuts across all fields. In 2001, there was no formal banking system. Today there is a functioning Central Bank with more than 30 regional branches and a single, internationally traded currency.

You think Indian economic growth is the fastest in South Asia? Think again: Afghan economic growth hovers between 12 and 14 percent per year, outstripping even India.

Income per capita has nearly doubled to \$355, compared to \$180 3 years ago. By providing Afghans with an increased opportunity to make a living and support families we are also providing them with hope.

And modernity, absent for decades, is returning to Afghanistan. There are now three mobile telephone companies serving over 3.5 million subscribers--almost 11 percent of the population.

In 2001, there were 50 kilometers of paved roadway; now, more than 7,400 kilometers of roads have been built and paved, with 1600 more kilometers due to be completed this year. A new bridge between Tajikistan and Afghanistan opened last week, creating new opportunities for regional trade and commerce.

We are helping Afghans so they can realize their own vision of their future. We are enabling them to have normal lives again. It is for Afghans to fulfill their dreams and govern their own country. But it should be our contribution to build roads and help them secure the gains they have made.

All this development is for naught, if society is not protected. Development and security must go hand in hand. All this reconstruction that I have mentioned has been possible because of the NATO-ISAF stabilization effort--and the parallel OEF mission.

With determined and brutal attackers like the Taliban and al Qaeda, providing security for the Afghan people is a tough business--one which relies on agile, combat-ready forces doing what is necessary to defeat an opponent that acknowledges no rules.

For this, we rely on both the ISAF and OEF missions. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force--ISAF--is authorized under a United Nations mandate. It's main mission is to help Afghanistan's reconstruction and to contribute to stability throughout Afghanistan. The more stable the environment, the better we can deliver humanitarian assistance, and help with reconstruction. Obviously, because it works to provide stability, ISAF is by definition actively engaged in counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban.

Thirty seven countries contribute to ISAF--26 NATO Allies and 11 partners, including Finland. ISAF has about 40,000 troops--a number that may sound large, but is in fact quite small for a mission and country the size of Afghanistan.

Operation Enduring Freedom--OEF--is a multifaceted operation that is fulfilling critical roles in combating terrorists and insurgents, as well as training and mentoring Afghan soldiers and police. It was launched in response to the September 11 attacks, with the United States was exercising its right of self defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. The UN Security Council recognized the U.S. right to act in self defense in UNSCR 1368, and NATO invoked Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty. Today over 1,000 non-U.S. troops serve within the approximately 12,000-strong OEF mission Afghanistan.

Almost two-thirds of OEF personnel work on training, mentoring and equipping the Afghan National Security Forces--the Army and Police. This is a critical part of our long term strategy in Afghanistan: building the capacity of the Afghan forces so they can increasingly provide for their own country's security.

Other OEF elements are involved in counterinsurgency operations in conjunction with Afghan forces. Their roles include collecting intelligence, mentoring Afghan forces, and conducting security operations, primarily against Taliban elements. A small number of multinational OEF forces are directly involved with counterterrorism operations aimed against foreign groups and individuals that pose a threat to Afghanistan's security and are linked to international terror.

ISAF and OEF are complementary, well coordinated missions. Some critics dispute this, and claim that poor coordination has led to civilian casualties. Those on the ground disagree. The verdict from senior NATO military leaders is that ISAF-OEF coordination is excellent, and the success of the coordination is a high priority for them. In fact, ISAF's Deputy Chief of Staff for Security is charged with coordination and resolving conflicts between the ISAF and OEF missions. OEF forces, for example, provide ISAF commanders with advanced notice of operations in their area.

Finland--along with NATO allies and other partners--is doing its share. You should be proud of your nation's contributions to the well-being of people in Afghanistan. But all of us must recognize that more is needed. Until the Afghan people can take over all the tasks themselves, they depend on our help to secure their country.

Here, I might add that as democratic societies based on shared, human values, we do hold ourselves to a high standard of behavior and performance in our military forces. And that is reflected in the way our media portrays events in Afghanistan.

But sometimes, that high-standard approach also obscures what is really happening on the ground--that we are dealing with a brutal opponent determined to impose a harsh will on the Afghan people, and our forces are there to prevent this.

Let's take some examples--and these are not the examples one gets from Western media, but ones that come from real people on the ground:

- In May, Taliban-al Qaeda-linked operatives filmed--and disseminated through video and electronic media--the beheading of a Pakistani man at the hands of a pre-teenage boy, his mind poisoned by extremist hatred and militancy.
- In June, the international press recounted the story of a six-year old destitute Afghan boy fitted with an explosive bomb belt by Taliban elements and told to "throw himself at international forces." This young boy outwitted the Taliban and requested assistance of an Afghan National Army patrol who safely removed the explosives. In early July, the Afghan National Army encountered an almost identical case of a 14 year old coerced into wearing a bomb belt by the Taliban.
- In July, Taliban elements took credit for a suicide bomb attack in Kandahar, Afghanistan that killed 13 schoolchildren.

In its April 2007 report entitled, "The Human Cost," Human Rights Watch states:

- "At least 669 Afghan civilians were killed in at least 350 separate armed attacks by anti-government forces in 2006.
- "At least 136 suicide attacks occurred in Afghanistan during 2006. At least 803 Afghan civilians were killed or injured in these suicide attacks."
- "Insurgent forces regularly targeted civilians, or attacked military targets and civilians without distinction or with the knowledge that attacks would cause disproportionate harm to civilians."

And it's not just Human Rights Watch: Amnesty International (often a critic of the U.S. Administration) and every other human rights NGO out there is denouncing the

Taliban and its atrocities.

Amnesty was scathing about the Taliban in its last report. Here are some of the bone chilling details Amnesty gave:

- "On the night of 3 January 2005, Abdul Habib, the headmaster of Sheykh Matthy Baba School in Zabul province, was beheaded in his home in front of his children."
- "On 14 December 2005, two suspected Taliban fighters reportedly dragged a teacher known as Laghmani from a classroom of students in Zarghon village in Nad Ali district, Helmand, and shot him at the school gates after he ignored letters (*shab nameh*) warning him to stop teaching girls."
- "On 9 December 2006, suspected Taliban insurgents broke into a house in Kunar province killing two sisters who were teachers, along with their mother, grandmother and a male relative. The Provincial Education Director reportedly said that the Taliban followed through a death threat that warned the sisters to stop teaching otherwise they would be killed."

Sadly, these stories are not uncommon and illustrate the utter brutality and inhumanity of the Taliban's methods. Through its attacks on women and children, and its exploitation of the destitute, the Taliban displays an utter disregard for the decency and compassion central to Islam and all the world's great religious traditions.

So for our own security and well-being--but especially also for the security and well-being of the Afghan people--our efforts there are critical.

My third theme today is that despite the immense challenges in Afghanistan--and the brutal efforts of the Taliban to terrorize the Afghan people and break the will of the international community--we are making real progress in Afghanistan and together, we and the Afghan people will succeed.

In fact, the increasing brutality of the Taliban is a testament to the group's growing desperation. Their growing attacks on women and children are due to their realization that the Afghan people have moved on, that they want a better life and now have hopes of attaining it. The Taliban cannot succeed on an open battlefield, or in open debate. That is why they are retreating to terrorist methods.

But with the figures I have cited on humanitarian progress, reconstruction and development, and indeed with the massive contributions to security, Afghanistan is making it.

Not everything looks rosy, to be sure. Who could expect it to? Since the 1979 Soviet invasion, Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest countries, has been subjected to decades of war and tyranny. Huge challenges lie ahead. But instead of the image of failure created by media coverage of a single suicide bomber, let's look at the overall image of a country coming into its own, despite all the difficulties it faces.

With our help, the Afghans are winning. For us to now abandon Afghans to their former oppressors now, after all this progress, would not just be folly on our part, but an act of unspeakable cruelty.

What more is needed today to help Afghanistan? There's a long list of needs: more police trainers; better coordination of international assistance efforts; more military liaison and training teams helping the Afghan military; tactical helicopters and maneuver forces; and--despite major commitments already made--further reconstruction and development resources. This just to name a few.

My country is deeply committed to Afghanistan, and we look forward to working with Finland, NATO Allies, the EU, and any others who share our vision of hope and want to help Afghanistan succeed.

Your country has done a great deal to help Afghans build their country. Because of you, Afghanistan is today a less traumatized place than it was just a few years ago. I want to commend you for your involvement.

Finland may be a small nation, but it has a lot of *sisu*.

You've been a great audience. Thank you very much for your attention.

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