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Presenter: Senior Defense Officials

Friday, October 12, 2001 - 1:10 p.m.

Background Briefing on Afghanistan

(Background briefing on Afghanistan by two Defense officials, introduced by Rear Adm. Craig R. Quigley, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for public affairs. The map used in this briefing is on DefenseLINK at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2001/011012-D-6570C-002.jpg>)

Quigley: Ladies and gentlemen, we have two individuals here from [name of organization deleted] this afternoon. The first individual and his --

Q: (Off mike.)

Quigley: Sure.

And the second is his assistant. Okay.

Gentlemen?

A: Were you laughing at the name or the procedure? (Laughter.)

Q: Sorry?

A: Were you laughing at the name or the procedure?

Q: No, just the whole -- (off mike). (Laughter.)

A: Okay. Yeah. It's a hoot. Thanks. Anybody here from Newsweek?

Q: Why?

A: Because of what I'm going to say next.

Q: Oh.

A: I really think that Fareed Zakaria has done a terrific job on his cover article, the cover piece. I've recommended it to some of our consumers as a good primer.

I don't know how much you know about the situation on the ground and the history of this place. My

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area of responsibility covers 24 countries, and this one about -- except for the terrorist aspect, this one about three months ago was right behind Nepal. So it's not something that we've really been looking at very hard until very recently.

There have been a lot of questions on the Northern Alliance, and I'd like to talk briefly on that. Maybe you could, [name deleted], point out some of these things while I'm up here by the mike.

The secretary was -- here we go. Great. The secretary was right on the mark when he said referring this to as a real alliance is probably a bit of an exaggeration. There's a lot of competition between the groups. There's a lot of competition within the groups. The groups are basically aligned along ethnic and religious lines.

The most predominant group is the one that was headed by the late Ahmad Shah Mashoud, and that's the Jamiat Islami, which is mostly up in the Northeast. And the area it holds is almost exactly the ethnic heartland of the Tajiks in the Northeast.

Another important group is that headed by General Dostam. That area we consider to be basically under Northern Alliance control -- (to staff) -- if you'd show that -- just south and west of Mazar-e Sharif. Mazar-e Sharif is an important city in the North. That's an Uzbek organization. He is an Uzbek.

And then in the Herat area, which is a Shi'a area, and south and east are the forces of Ismail Khan.

Now I want to throw out a couple of things from an intelligence point of view that are rather new and will follow up on some things that were asked of the secretary and I believe I can tell you about. There's one provincial center in the province of Ghowr, G-H-O-W-R. It is Chaghcharan. (To colleague.) You want to spell it for them?

A: Please. Thank you. C-H-A-G-H-C-H-A-R-A-N.

A: The Northern Alliance has claimed that that has been taken from the Taliban. We believe that may very well have happened.

This is also -- not to contradict the secretary, because I agree with everything he says -- this is also probably not an area where there have been heavy coalition air operations. So it's not really affected by -- the forward edge of the battle area, the FEBA, as we call it, is not really affected by allied operations.

Q: Was the town --

A: Excuse me?

Q: Was that town taken in the last week or very recently?

A: In the last 48 hours.

Q: Does that open up the way for the rebel forces to make more headway to -- is it key area, or is it sort of secondary?

A: This is now -- now please understand, we think it may very well have happened as it has been claimed in open sources by the Northern Alliance. We're not confirming that it happens. We're not quite there. And I'm not holding anything back from you; we're just not quite there yet.

It's important for a couple of reasons. For one, it connects the Ismail Khan forces up with the Dostam forces. (To colleague.) You jump in at any time. [Name of briefer deleted] is my real expert on this area. I can call him by his first name, right?

A: Okay.

Q: Can you spell "Dostam" -- (off mike) -- the Uzbek guy? How do you spell his last name?

A: It's usually spelled, in English, Dostam, D-O-S-T-A-M. Sometimes you see it D-O-S-T-U-M.

A: Okay? It's important for a couple reasons. One, because it connects up with those other forces. The forces of Ismail Khan are largely Hazara. That's a Shi'a minority in the majority Sunni Afghanistan. Non-Uzbek, non-Tajik. And also, it's along a major road connecting Kabul with Herat through -- between the contested area here and the pretty well controlled area here.

Q: I'm sorry. Did you say that Ismail Khan's forces are largely Hazara?

A: Yes.

Q: I thought they were Herati Persians, Persian speakers. The Hazaras are in the center of the country.

A: This is the traditional Hazara area. There is intermarriage and intermingling of villages and groups between Persian cultures close to the Iranian border and Shi'a Hazaras in the center of the country.

Staff: Excuse me. When you speak, can you please go to the podium so that we can make sure we get a good transcript.

A: Okay. Fine.

Staff: Thank you.

A: We have been, as in the past week, been doing some background just for some of your colleagues. This is the first time we've done it for so large a group. And I was warned by one of them that I was treated gently by him compared to what I would be getting here. So far, you've been pretty good.

Q: So would you say that the Persians are basically Shi'a, or the Iranians? Some Sufis, but mostly Shi'a? Not in Afghanistan, but in Iran.

A: I'm not sure if I understand your question now, sir.

Q: I said that in Iran, the Persians/Iranians are mostly Shi'a; some Sufis, but mostly Shi'a, so the intermarriage.

A: There's no difference. Sufi and Shi'a are not different things, necessarily. Sufi could be Sunni or Shia'a.

Q: Well, there's a slight (inaudible), but they're mostly Shi'a in Persia, are they not?

A: They're mostly Twelver Shi'a in Persia -- in Iran. The Farsi-speaking Persian origin are almost 99 percent Shi'a.

The other thing that we can tell you is that -- you may have heard reports of defections by the --

reports by the Northern Alliance of defections of Taliban commanders from Konduz -- if you can point to that.

Q: And spell it.

A: K-O-N-D-U-Z.

A: We think it's highly possible that that happened, although we're not sure about the numbers. Forty commanders, 1,200 fighters was what was claimed.

Historically the Northern Alliance makes rather exaggerated claims, so we're not sure, but we think it's highly possible it happened. Defections are going to be one measure of Taliban stability.

Q: Any particular significance in that particular area or defections in that area?

A: That is significant in that area. There is one area right along the forward edge of the battle area called Taloqan -- T-O-L (sic) -- is it on there?

Q: Well, you can -- yeah.

A: You want to spell it?

A: Taloqan is T-A-L-O-Q--A-N.

A: And Konduz is just a short way down the road from that in Taliban-held territory, and that's also on the way to Mazar-e Sharif, which is a -- which is the cultural capital of Uzbeki Afghanistan and a principal target of the Dostam forces to the south of it.

Q: And I'm sorry, again, what are you saying has occurred at Taloqan?

A: Well, that hasn't changed hands yet, but that's a major area where there are military -- there are military confrontations, military clashes. There are -- if I may, sir, just for a moment, I'll call on you in a moment. There are, I believe -- we put out four major areas of military activity over the last several months between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance.

One is just north of Kabul along the line there, outside the airfield to the north. Another is at Taloqan.

And another is in the area of Avaus that I just showed you that the provincial capital was -- appears to have been taken by the Northern Alliances forces, by the Ismail Khan forces.

Q: Say again please.

A: Excuse me.

Q: The name of the town.

Q: Chaghcharan.

A: Oh.

A: Chaghcharan.

A: Okay, you got the spelling on that.

(Cross talk.)

Q: Is that two words or one?

A: One word.

Q: (Off mike) -- the name of that town?

A: Taloqan?

Q: No. One is in Kabul, and after that --

A: I said Taloqan after Kabul, and then I said Mazar-e-Sharif, and then I said Chaghcharan, and I said that's in the province of Ghowr.

Q: Are you going to put this particular map on your website, because different maps show different --

A: Yes, that will be there. This is the unclassified CIA map.

Yes, sir?

Q: Have you guys been able to get us the correct pronunciation of the terrorist organization? Is it "al ky-da," "al kay-da"? And what does that mean from the Arabic?

And the second part of the question is, in relationship to the troops, how many troops they have in comparison to the Taliban?

A: Okay. The correct pronunciation -- I'm so glad you asked that, because -- the correct pronunciation is "al kaa-ida."

(Cross talk.)

A: Okay, it is spelt -- are there any Arabic speakers here? Okay, so I -- okay. If you were to try to do it phonetically, see the Arabic (kof ?) is different from the Arabic (kaf ?). But if you try to spell it out kind of phonetically, it would be K-A-A and then dash, I-D-A. And, of course, an al -- a definite article "al" before it. And it means "base" in the sense of "military base" in Arabic.

Yes, ma'am?

Q: Sir, the 1,200 defections, when did that happen?

A: That's been claimed in the last week. And remember I said that we couldn't confirm those numbers. I think they're probably high.

Yes, ma'am?

Q: Can I follow up on that? Where are these people defecting to? Who's accepting them? Is it the Northern Alliance?

A: Yes, the Northern Alliance.

Q: Well --

Q: (Inaudible) -- of military activity before we --

Q: Excuse me.

A: Excuse me. I haven't finished with this --

Q: You haven't finished my question, either, when you get back to it, the other part, how many troops they have -- al Qaeda.

A: I'll get that in a minute, sir.

Yes, ma'am?

Q: Why politically is the Northern Alliance so willing to accept these defectors into their ranks?

A: The farther -- this is a very complex area. I mean, Afghanistan makes Bosnia look homogenous, okay? (Laughter.)

Q: Would you be willing to say that on camera?

A: No, but I'm willing to say it for the record. It's really a -- there have been waves of settlement, waves of invasion over centuries, and for the most part, people have coexisted, except in times of strife.

But my point is, when you get away from the centers -- (to staff) -- And again, if you'd point to these as I mention them -- from the religious center of Kandahar and the political capital of Kabul out towards the outlying districts and areas, you'll find that the ideological commitment of the Taliban troops becomes less and less.

And that old scores, clans, families, tribes have much more to do with bribes, money; have much more to do with where they are and what they're doing than ideological commitment. And sometimes they are related to or from the same village as people who are right across the line from each other. So in this area, there could be Tajiks on both sides, although the leadership is Pashtun.

Now, we think that what Taliban has tried to do -- and this relates to your question, sir, and I'm sorry for waiting so long -- is to stiffen up these groups -- "pour encourager les autres" -- to encourage the others. And they would do this with committed Pashtun troops from the Pashtun heartland or they would do it more significantly with al Qaeda fighters -- who are very ideologically motivated, and who bring a different kind of fighting to the front than is experienced in a very long time. They give no quarter. They expect no quarter. They defend areas where traditional Taliban troops would, you know, pull back and hope for another day.

Now numbers: These are not groups conducive to the typical order of battle. As with the Taliban, you have corps -- they're only called corps because the three last armies of Afghanistan had corps -- but vary widely in number from a couple of thousand to almost 10,000. So it is true with the mostly Arab forces; the numbers -- anywhere from 1,500 to 4,000.

Q: Al Qaeda?

A: Yes. And it varies.

Yes, sir?

Q: I've seen reference to a specific al Qaeda formation known as the 055 brigade.

A: Yeah, the 55th division --

Q: -- at one-time based --

A: -- it's been called as well.

Q: Right. At one time based just north of Kabul. Could you talk about how -- what the role that they've played, and have they become more important to the Taliban given the problems the Taliban have had in recent years in forced conscription among Pashtuns?

A: Yes, they have become more important, and it's part of the important relationship between Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammed Omar and their top commanders.

Q: Would about \$100 million have anything to do with it?

A: That certainly is an inducement. The money is very important. I do want to get on this -- talk about the 55th division somewhat. But before I do, just in response to your statement, this is a very complex relationship between these two leaders. It's based in differing quantities on each side, on financial, ideological, religious and personal relationships. And there's also a measure of honor involved.

Now, on the 55th, it's not a divisional brigade in the sense we normally think of one, that can be deployed, that has kind of combined arms behind it, has an artillery part or a heavy weapons and whatnot and can be sent. It's a -- it appears to be a pool of men with a general organizational structure and small units that can be -- [name omitted], come in at any time now -- that can be thrown into the front, put in various places at times of need. It is that part of al Qaeda that appears to be exclusively dedicated to the support of the Taliban.

(Cross talk.)

Q: (Inaudible.)

A: [Name omitted] -- has a little more.

A: On the 55th brigade, it's not a brigade in the sense that a Western army is a brigade. It's maybe around 500, less than 500 to a little bit more than 500. But that can vary depending upon casualties, obviously, and also on new recruits.

(Cross talk.)

Q: They've been involved in --

Q: (Inaudible) -- fighting force is the Taliban though?

A: Let me take the follow-up here, sir, and then I'll go to you.

Q: They were reportedly deeply involved in the fighting in the north for the last year. Are they still involved in that fighting, I think it's particularly around Taloqan? And have we been trying to target that particular formation?

A: I can't -- we can't -- we can't comment on that. We -- I'm unable to discuss battle damage

assessment or ongoing operations.

(Cross talk.)

A: Sir?

Q: What about -- what about the one part of the question unfinished? Now, you told us about the number of troops in al Qaeda. How many battle troops does the Taliban have? And can you break it down into ground troops --

A: I can't go -- I cannot go into very specific numbers. I can give you a -- for two reasons; one, because I've been enjoined not to, and the other because -- which is an even better reason -- because we don't know exactly --

Q: But roughly --

A: And they're roughly between 20,000 and 40,000. Now you need -- (to colleague) -- right? That, along the line against the Tajiks, at least.

A: But the overall Taliban -- I would put the lower limit at 20,000, and sir, I would put the upper limit a little bit higher than 40,000.

A: Let's -- we could go to -- I've seen up to 65,000. And the reason is, it depends upon whether these are people pulled out of their villages in emergencies, these are cadres and units that are formed up in times of need by forced conscription. So it's a real loose organization. I mean, considering it an army is rather inaccurate.

Q: Is it your sense that the -- from the 55th Brigade that small chunks of that go into the broader Taliban units to provide them with motivation, backbone, "I'll shoot you if you try to retreat"? I mean, can you give us a sense of how they are seeded into the Taliban units, or are they seeded into it?

A: That's -- I think you have it exactly, sir. It is in that way.

Q: That's to encourage the others, as you said earlier.

A: Right, to encourage the others.

Q: Motivational speakers.

A: Motivational speakers. And they also -- I mean, they also have an effective role to play if they're needed in a time when an advance is needed, you need some backbone for an advance, or for defense.

(Cross talk.)

Q: Can you give us the nationality and any kind of breakdown, ethnic or nationality, of this 55th Brigade?

Q: I think they're Arabs.

A: Yeah, they were Arabs, predominantly Arabs.

Q: Saudis?

A: Lots -- I really don't want to get into individual on that level, to make any kind of a majority of one nationality or another. I mean, at the upper level Saudi and Egyptian, in their leadership --

Q: Just a point of clarification. Way back in the briefing you started to outline four areas of military confrontation.

A: Right.

Q: You got through three. I think you've made a reference to the fourth one --

A: I did four -- well, okay, I think you're right.

Q: Can you just clarify what the fourth area was?

A: Did I say Mazar-e Sharif?

Q: You said that sort of passing in reference later on.

A: Well, Mazar-e Sharif is the other major area, and that's the Dostam force is south of that. Sorry.

Q: So it would be Kabul, Taloqan, Chaghcharan, and Mazar-e Sharif.

A: Exactly.

Q: And you also said earlier that the reported defections around Konduz is that the way it's pronounced?

A: Yes.

Q: -- would be significant if those numbers are accurate. Why would they be significant?

A: They're not significant so much for themselves as for the trend they help to establish.

Q: Can I ask you about the issue of weapons of mass destruction? It's been reported that al Qaeda has some type of perhaps underground facilities for chemical, biological, radiological-type development. Is that the case?

A: I can't comment on WMD facilities, but I can on WMD capability. And what I'm going to do is give you a baseline, all right? I'm not going to say that they do not have a nuclear weapon. But at the baseline, what we believe is that they have a crude chemical and possibly biological capability. And if there's any nuclear capability, it is liable to be more radiological than fissile.

Q: What type of chem or bio, do you have a sense of what it is?

A: Poisons, possibly chlorine, phosgene, that sort of -- we're not talking up to sarin.

(Cross talk.)

A: Phosgene, chlorine --

Q: Is that the Taliban, or is that al Qaeda?

A: No, al Qaeda.

Q: What about the bio?

A: Well, bio -- nothing -- I can't say anything except toxins, possibly. And I don't -- we don't have any -- that's a baseline. There are other possibilities. Of course, anthrax is a possibility. But that's a baseline that is probable.

Q: What do you mean by a baseline?

Q: A minimum.

A: I mean as a probable, a probable. And this could be a bucket full, this could be a ton.

Q: And how crude is that? Can you expand on that? Is it --

A: Well, some of that phosgene or chlorine, there's kind of a single precursor -- they don't take a lot of mixing; they're not binary; they're unitary. Certainly the delivery means, although it could be innovative, would probably not be sophisticated. Okay?

Yes, sir.

Q: There's some talk or certainly earlier this week that one of the intentions -- and I know you can't talk operational details -- but it was to crumble the Taliban from within.

From what you said here today, I mean, I get the sense that you think that is a very good possibility, but not necessarily a good thing. In other words, that the Taliban -- I mean, could you talk a little bit about that? Do you see that as something easy to do, hard to do -- for the Taliban to crumble from within, as you've laid out here, just kind of mix into all of these other groups or disappear?

A: May I just say something first? When you ask about this region "Is the reason for some development this, this or that?" the answer is invariably yes. (Laughter.) The question usually is, What is the preponderance of the reason? It is easy, and -- it is easy to give soundbite-type answers to questions, but -- and they may have a small part of the truth, and I'm really loath to sound lecturing and turn it into a tutorial on -- in answer to questions, to tell you -- to give the impression that this is so complex, that you couldn't possibly understand, because I don't mean that.

But there -- it goes back to the question of whether the Taliban -- whether we think of -- the Taliban is unlike anything we've ever seen before. Is it a nation or is it a movement? Now, if you destroy the military capability of the Taliban, and you take away 90 percent of its following, and the rest go to the hills, you still have a movement. You don't have a national government. You don't have an army that can control the country.

Q: They don't have a government now though, right?

A: They have a government. They have ambassadors. They have diplomatic relations with one nation. They -- you know, a government doesn't have to be in complete control of its nation to be a government, and from 1861 to 1865, we didn't. So, you can have a government. This -- but on this question -- you can erode and even destroy the cohesion of a movement like this. And it may not be very difficult to do that. You can find vulnerabilities that are strategic and operational, like Mazar-e Sharif. You can find psychological and other vulnerabilities like rifts between tribes and commitment to ideology between moderates and so-called radicals or radically pragmatic moderates, as we call them in Iran. Or you can -- you can -- (laughter) -- or you can -- or you can try to completely destroy

them. But if you try to completely destroy them, that's a lot more difficult, particularly when they believe themselves to be based on an idea.

Q: Can you explain the centers of power in Kandahar and Kabul? And, you know, if the Northern Alliance was to take Kabul, what would that mean to the Taliban, considering we hear so much about infrastructure or governmental structures in Kandahar?

A: Well, you know, it's something to take Kabul. If they could take Kabul, that would be -- I'm sure they'd think that that would be very nice. But they would know that they don't have control of the country, and they have not eliminated the Taliban as a significant political and military force until they've hit Kandahar.

Q: Sir, can you speak to --

A: Yes?

Q: -- going back to the heterogeneity of --

A: I always go to somebody who says "sir" so -- (laughter.)

Q: Yes, sir, sir!

Q: -- the heterogeneity. How important -- this is kind of a background question. How important are linguistic -- to what extent are there linguistic differences coinciding with the ethnic differences? How important are those differences? And to sort of border on the operational, how well-prepared is the U.S. military in terms of special operations for the linguistic challenge?

A: Okay, I can't address the preparedness of the military, I mean, not because I'm enjoined not to; simply because I'm not competent to do it. I mean, we have some capability in intelligence, of course. But, I mean, the capability will -- there will be shortages; the capability will be there when we need it, I'm pretty sure.

Q: And then from a linguistic point of view?

A: From a linguistic point of view, there are significant differences between the groups. I'll let the [other briefer] get into the real details, if you want to get into Ural-Altaic languages, and that sort of thing. But Uzbek is a separate Turk-based language; Tajik is a separate -- Dari, the language of the Tajiks is a separate language, and Pushto is another language.

Do you want to go into any more detail than that?

A: The differences are sharp differences. But the Pushto-speaking people have ruled the country traditionally; the Tajiks have not, until after the fall of Najibullah. So I think that one big difference in the situation in Afghanistan now is the Tajik community, which historically was subservient to the Pushto-speaking peoples, now has weapons because of the Soviet involvement there.

Q: Sir? (Laughter.)

A: Yes? Who said that?

Q: Can you address briefly the mine problem? We hear all sorts of horror stories about hundreds of thousands of mines still in the country. Can you give us any kind of parameters at all or tell us about

--

A: Millions. Millions.

Q: Do we know where they are? Does anybody know where they are?

A: Well, the Russians know where a lot of them are. And -- (to staff) Have you got any more on that?

A: Sir, no specifics.

Q: You talked about the aspect of trying to get the Taliban to collapse from within, and we've been focused on the military part of this. But the Taliban has used other means to maintain cohesion and loyalty, particularly money.

A: Right.

Q: And I'm wondering if you could talk about the fact that the border with Pakistan has been closed for a long time. One of their primary sources of money was the Afghan transit, trade from Pakistan --

A: Right.

Q: -- the narcotics trade, and support from Pakistan. They got their wheat from Pakistan, a lot of their spare parts, fuel, et cetera.

A: Yes.

Q: Could you talk about how seriously they've been affected by the border closures, and whether or not they're still getting any of the logistical support from within Pakistan?

A: Okay, I -- in addition to BDA and ongoing operations, I've been enjoined not to go into any detail on the effects of the campaign and the situation on the Taliban. But I can -- but, you know, that can get silly. I can give you some of it.

As you know, you heard the secretary say that some of the financial measures we've taken, we and friends have taken, have borne fruit. I think I can confirm that that is the case and that the Taliban is strapped. A lot of the traditional ways of their getting funding are no longer available to them or they haven't -- you know, usually alternatives are found to these things, but they're cumbersome, they're not timely. And what the Taliban really needs money for us bribes.

Q: To whom? By whom?

A: To its commanders, especially in the outlying areas.

Q: I have a question on Brigade 55, if I might. Are these different from the other Taliban troops? Are they better trained? Are they better armed? Are they better paid?

A: Yes, all of those.

Q: All of those.

A: Yes.

Q: Can you speak to what kind of arms they have?

A: Oh, they have --

Q: Which troops are we referring to now?

A: The 55th Brigade and the -- the al Qaeda, the fighters with the Taliban. We don't -- you know, most of our information on this is anecdotal. You know, the condition of one AK-47 compared to others is difficult to detect with our usual technical collection means. They have pretty much the same types of arms that the rest of the Taliban have. They are probably better trained, better trained.

We're reaching a generation now, particularly in the younger soldiers in Afghanistan, who have not been hardened by the conflict with the Soviets. They are used to static warfare, pretty much on a much smaller scale, like the "phony war" of 1939-40 on the Western Front. But the Afghans -- well, we call them the Afghans, the Afghan Arabs. The Afghan Arabs are more motivated. They've had recent training. They consider themselves professionals, not just part-time. So that's a big difference. We don't see them much with heavy artillery and armor, to the limited extent that the Taliban has it.

Yes, sir?

Q: Can I just follow on that? Can you address, either of you, address your assessment of military cohesion of these front-line forces that are opposing Northern Alliance forces now and may well have come under some of the exact --

A: (To other defense official): You should have a chance at this.

Q: Microphone.

A: I'm a little concerned about getting into effects of the campaign, sir. I mean, we've talked about, and I believe the secretary referred to defections. I mean --

A: Excuse me. We're talking about the Northern Alliance or the Taliban?

Q: I'm sorry, the Taliban.

A: Oh, okay. Go ahead.

A: So to the extent that there are reports of defections, then, I mean, the conclusion is that there's some problem with cohesion.

Q: But you can say that up along that whole front that runs from Taloqan down to Kabul? Is it consistent? Are you seeing consistent -- (inaudible) --

A: Well, that's actually two fronts.

Q: Excuse me, divided by the tunnel.

A: Yeah, right.

Q: But running along those fronts, are you seeing either a general pattern of erosion of military cohesion along that?

A: I think it would be best not to comment.

A: No, that is an impact-to-the-campaign question.

Q: If I could go back to -- go back to -- I just wanted to clarify, you had -- you said chemical and possible biological. You sort of said biological toxins and you kind of threw anthrax in there at the end. What is our understanding of --

A: No, I said the baseline was toxins. Okay? And then when I said, you know, the possibilities, yeah, anthrax is possible.

(Cross talk.)

Q: (Inaudible) -- could include anthrax?

A: Excuse me? Yeah. You have to understand, in the collection on this and what we -- we get such a wide range of reporting. In this area, it's just impossible to give confirmation.

Q: And on nuclear, did I understand --

A: Follow up.

Q: Thank you. Did I -- you said radiological. Are you -- are you basically saying, now that is not a nuclear bomb, that is the ability to expose people to radiation?

A: That's a NBCR -- that is an NBCR-type, nuclear/biological/chemical/radiological. It falls into that. It's -- there's no explosion. The damage to human beings comes from the radiation. It's radiological material.

Yes.

Q: Along the same lines --

Q: Can we be -- can we be clear on that though? Are you saying that they in fact have the ability to use a radiological --

A: No, I'm not.

Q: Okay, fine. All right, I just wanted to --

A: I'm just saying that in the range of what they could have that's nuclear, as opposed to chemical and biological, the radiological is more likely than fissile --

Q: Along the same lines -- along the same lines --

Q: Do they have ray guns?

A: Follow up?

Q: Do they have ray guns? How do they do that?

A: Follow up? Go ahead.

Q: Along the same lines, you said a few minutes ago that their delivery systems I think were probably unsophisticated but unconventional.

A: Right.

Q: Can you give us any guidance as to how widespread they would be able to deliver these weapons? Would they be able to deliver them in a relatively small area, or a widely disbursed area?

A: Well, you've seen some -- I mean, you probably know as much as I do about the delivery means that have been reported from crop dusters to hand sprayers to somebody getting on -- some infected person getting on a plane with smallpox, and when you land, everybody is infected. So --

Q: Sir.

(Cross talk.)

Q: I'm talking about radiation.

A: (Inaudible) -- has been a media report on this.

Q: Sir, from your study, would bin Laden and Omar -- they are relatively close locations, would you think they would be communicating with each other in relatively small distance? And secondly, if the U.S. were to take military action during the Ramadan, how serious the impact would be that to them?

A: Okay, on the first question, I can't discuss that. I can tell you we've had reporting that's gone both ways, but I can't tell you what we've concluded on it.

On the second, the 6th of October, 1973, the Egyptians launched the October War; it was the 10th day of Ramadan. There's -- what? Westerners doing heavy military operations during Ramadan, it could be a problem regionally and locally. The secretary said that it's not really going to affect our operations. We may very well -- you, know from an intelligence point of view, if I look at it from -- if I were analyzing what we call "blues," United States activity, from a "red," the enemy's point of view, we may be very well in a different and less kinetic stage than we are now. I can't say anything about that; I don't know, but that's certainly a possibility. This is not going to be a big issue.

Yes, sir?

Q: Can you describe the front that's north of Kabul, physically describe it, you know, where people are, how many troops are up there on either side, and what the terrain is, and what the objectives are.

A: On the Taliban side, in the front north of Kabul, there are two corps groupings. And again, when you think "corps," that's just a designation. You know, they're arrayed with heavy weapons in revetments in covered and concealed positions to some extent. To some extent the Taliban forces are -- some of those forces are in what we would call a garrison sort of environment. I think -- although it's difficult to estimate numbers of people, I think the Taliban forces in that particular front would be somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000.

There's a lot of heavy equipment in that area, and I haven't gone through to identify how many are at which point. So -- and by an area, I mean north of Kabul. But the Taliban have a lot of their armor in that area; they have a fair amount of artillery.

On the Northern Alliance side, since we're not devoting a lot of effort to targeting -- or any effort, obviously, to targeting the Northern Alliance, I really don't have the ability to tell you much in the way of numbers. But the overall Northern Alliance number of personnel is not very large. So their numbers of personnel in the area north of Kabul is probably going to be less than what the Taliban has there.

Q: How close --

Q: Fifteen thousand fighters -- does that sound about right for the Northern Alliance, or that -- as you say, they exaggerate a bit. Has that been exaggerated?

A: That's a ballpark estimate.

A: The Northern Alliance.

A: For the whole Northern Alliance.

Q: So that in area --

Q: What about the capabilities --

Q: Does the Taliban hold the high ground there?

(Cross talk.)

A: We have a follow-up here.

A: Let me just step back for a minute. In talking about the Northern Alliance, let's -- first is the forces that used to be directly under the control of General Massoud. In that case, the ballpark estimate that is sort of the middle of the range of reports was about 15,000.

Now there are other forces. The Hezb Wahadat, the Shi'a force that's in the highlands, in the mountains in northern -- in central Afghanistan -- you know, ballpark estimate is 5,000 to 15,000.

Ismail Khan, which has some relationships with -- fighting with the Hezb Wahadat, there the ranges are fairly great -- between several hundred and several thousand.

Q: And what about the southern tribes we hear so much about? Where are they? I mean, how many people do they have and where are they located?

A: When you see references to southern tribes, you're talking about the Pushtu-speaking people who dominate the southern and southeastern and eastern portion of Afghanistan. And there are dozens of tribes. There are several tribes that are larger and traditionally more important, and have higher status.

Q: So are they taking up arms against the Taliban? Are they sitting this out? What are they doing?

A: Well, those people -- some of those people were the initial recruiting base for the Taliban. And I think even before this campaign began, there were a lot of reports -- so this doesn't get into effects of the campaign -- there were a lot of reports that the people in that region had become disenchanted with the Taliban, including the Pushtu-speaking people who had joined the Taliban organization.

Q: Is the U.S. in contact with all these groups besides the northern Alliance?

A: I have no idea. I can't comment on that.

Q: And one last thing. On the armor for the Northern Alliance, what do they have? And what new stuff are they getting from -- is there any from Russia?

A: We -- yeah, we can a bit on -- we can't address the Russian relationship, but on the Tajik, the

Massoud forces, they have some armor. (To colleague.) Do you want -- you can talk without numbers.

A: For the Massoud forces in the Northern Alliance -- the forces that used to work for General Massoud have old -- what we would call ex-Soviet armor -- T-55s, T-54s, T-62s, old equipment and old designs.

Q: Could you go back to the question about the terrain in the North -- I mean, what the terrain is? I mean --

A: Okay. Thank you. There's a plain north of Kabul, right here. That plain goes for about 50 kilometers north of Kabul before it runs into mountains to the east, mountains to the north, and mountains to the west, really. And there are also hills south of Kabul. But --

Q: Is that the Panjshir Valley?

A: And the Panjshir Valley cuts northeast, generally, right here -- runs northeast to southwest, northeast of Kabul. And it comes out -- the valley empties into that plain that is north of Kabul.

Q: During the Bosnia and Kosovo campaigns, we heard a lot about forces being secreted in neighborhoods for shelter. I haven't heard you speak much about that in this case. Does the Taliban not operate that way?

A: I don't really want to get into deception and denial. I'll just say that the Taliban don't appear to have learned a lot from the Gulf War and the former Yugoslavia. They don't have any television, either.

(Cross talk.)

Q: You said earlier -- when you started out, you said Afghanistan makes Bosnia look homogenous, you know.

A: Yes.

Q: Could you just tell us in a nutshell what that means in terms of problems in getting all these people together, for the United States or whoever wants to try to get them together? I mean, is this a massive problem, or is it doable? Is it -- what -- how would you describe it?

A: I think [title of colleague deleted] would probably be more eloquent on this, but I would say, to begin with, that for centuries the Afghans have gotten by without necessarily being a homogenous nation, even, or even thinking of themselves as -- I mean, if you had pinched an Afghan in the 19th century in the middle of the night and asked him what he was, he'd -- the first thing he'd probably say was that he was a Muslim or Pashtun.

It depends on what part of the country he was in which he would say first, if he was a Muslim or if he was of that -- so the acquiescence to a central authority usually recognized as a member of the Pashtun majority or plurality, and a certain level of combat and strife between tribes and clans, tolerated in the outlying regions, but no big threats on the central authority, and that constitutes, for Afghan history, a pretty acceptable level of cohesion.

Q: So what are the prospects now for acquiescence to a central authority?

A: Well, there is the man who would be king, Zahir Shah, that we hear a lot about. I can't get into a lot of speculation. The traditional assembly, the Loya, and what not, have been raised. There's -- the

prospects are difficult, but the alternatives, especially for the neighbors and the international community, is even worse.

Q: Is there a history of power sharing? I mean, that is what sort of a number of international institutions, as well as the U.S. government, are pointing toward, is some sort of power-sharing arrangement, if that would be feasible. And I guess what we're all trying to ask is, looking at it from a historical point of view, power sharing doesn't look like it has --

A: There has been power sharing, but not in the sense we think of it as competing forces that can have, for example, representatives of their parties in the parliament and on the cabinet, and what not. But there's been a lot of power-sharing historically with tribes, ethnic groups, what not.

(To other briefer) Do you want to go into that a little bit?

A: Yes, sir, I agree completely. When you talk about a central government in Kabul, if such a thing were created, it would be -- for a centralized government, if such a thing were created, it would be an innovation in Afghan history. So there's a tradition of power-sharing, if you will, which are usually, you know, arrangements, coalitions, alliances, that sort of flow upward to the king. All Afghans recognize Kabul as the center of power symbolically and in a nationalistic sense.

Q: Can I ask you, is the Taliban, are they running out of gas and supplies? And are any foreign nations providing military assistance to the Taliban?

A: The first is, that affects the campaign. The second, we know of no significant aid from -- organized aid from a foreign state.

Q: How about insignificant?

A: Next?

Q: A lot of American military commanders talk about winning a war by getting inside the opponent's decision cycle. You've got, it sounds like dozens, maybe hundreds of decision cycles at work here.

A: Yes.

Q: Is that what makes this so difficult and such a different kind of war, that you don't know which cycle to get in or when you've gotten it?

A: I think that's an aspect of it. Certainly, one of the things we do in intelligence now -- actually, we had efforts underway seven months before the Jeremiah Commission, that followed the -- looked at the way intelligence handled the nuclear tests in India and Pakistan -- and I was not, by the way the defense intelligence officer for South Asia at that time.

And so we do a lot of modeling and trying to think the way the enemy does, as we were (inaudible). But you correctly pointed out, there are wheels within wheels. But we've done a lot of intelligence work on UBL and Taliban centers of gravity, as we call it.

Q: Could we get a spelling clarification on something?

A: Yes.

Q: Pashtun and the language they speak, are they spelled differently, or --

A: They are -- yes, they have been spelled in a variety of different ways.

Q: What -- can you give some.

A: Yeah.

Q: Pashtoon?

A: I think I'm going to let -- [name omitted], the preferred spelling for Pashtun -- Pushtuns and Pashtun -- Pashtu.

(Laughter.)

A: There is not preferred spelling, and --

A: Well, you have one. Tell them. That'll be the national one. (Laughs.)

A: Usually people refer to Pushtu speaking, and when they say that, they spell it P-U-S-H-T-U.

Q: All right.

A: And people also -- people also will refer to Pashtun tribes: P-A-S-H-T-U-N. And then the final thing is, for some reason that I was trying to figure out but I -- just recently, but I haven't figured it out yet, in Pakistan, the same ethnic group that we refer to in the Afghanistan context as Pushtu or Pashtun, in Pakistan is referred to as Pathan, which is spelled P-A-T-H-A-N.

A: A Kipling thing. Yes.

Q: Two things. Can you speak -- first, can you speak to the presence of Pakistani nationals volunteering with the Taliban?

A: No.

Q: Okay.

A: Second.

Q: Is -- would the king be the expected sort of center of power for the Pashtun should the Taliban become less powerful, or is there another person or group --

A: No, there's not -- there's not necessarily another group, and the king isn't necessarily it. I'll just conclude by saying the Pashtun in Afghanistan probably need a Pashtun alternative to the Taliban.

Q: Is the king part of it?

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you very much. Thank you very much indeed.

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[And a special thank you to one of the briefers for reviewing and correcting many of the spellings in this transcript.]



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