

BRIEFING BY U.S. AMBASSADOR TO AFGHANISTAN RONALD E. NEUMANN
ON UPCOMING ELECTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

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Kabul, Afghanistan

(Via Telephone)
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AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Good afternoon or good morning, depending on your perspective.

MR. SCENSNY: Good morning, Ambassador. This is Len Scensny here in Washington.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Oh, hi, Len.

MR. SCENSNY: Yeah, hi. Welcome to Kabul. We're still gathering our journalists here. We're waiting on the arrival as well of Tom Casey. Shall we start now?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: It's fine by me because I'll run out of time on the other end, so let's go ahead.

MR. SCENSNY: Okay, fine. So why don't we get started.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Do you want me to start with a few brief comments?

MR. SCENSNY: I think that will be fine. Then when we're through, when you're through, you can start taking questions. I'll ask the reporters to identify themselves when they speak up.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Yeah, I can't see anybody and I don't know if they're snickering.

MR. SCENSNY: Not yet. I'll tell you that. I'll do the laugh track for you.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: And you're on a speaker there or something so everybody can hear; is that the deal?

MR. SCENSNY: Exactly. Everyone can hear. We're in the Public Affairs Bureau Conference Room. They can all hear. We can all see each other. So I think this can be managed pretty well.

QUESTION: This is on the record, right?

MR. SCENSNY: This is on record.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Let me just make a couple comments. Yeah, we're on the record. Let me just make a couple comments about the election and then I'm just going to stop right there so we can just basically do questions. Because I would say one needs to look at the upcoming September election, 18 election, in two ways. On the one hand, it is the final stage of a three-year process laid out in Bonn in 2001 and every stage of that process has been met or is about to be met with this election. That's a success.

At the same time, I would say that this is not a destination, this is a milestone. This is part of a much longer process of stabilizing Afghanistan both as a nation and as a democracy. And that is a big job which involves both the development of a political culture, the establishment of a democratic government that has never been seen in this country, the building of an economy that people can live off of and the re-absorption into society of people that have been fighting each other for 25 years. And that's a very large job and, in that sense, this is, as I said, a milestone.

I feel pretty good about where we are. I don't want to exaggerate it, but I think let me just put -- stop there as a context in which I'm viewing the elections and let's just go to your questions.

MR. SCENSNY: Okay. Charlie.

QUESTION: Well, I have a question about drugs, not elections.

MR. SCENSNY: Any questions on elections?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: That's okay.

QUESTION: Ambassador Neumann, this is Libby Leist at NBC News. Can you hear me okay?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Hi. I hear you fine.

QUESTION: Can you just address the security situation on the ground and what your feeling is about how it's going and how it will be in September when the elections occur?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Okay. I think you can look at the security situation from several different perspectives. If you mean -- let me break them up. One is the security situation in terms of, "Does security pose a threat to the elections?" My answer is no, it does not. I'm not saying you won't have an incident or you could even have a big incident. There's no 100 percent guarantees. But the overall situation is not only in reasonably good shape but, I mean, you've got to understand I'm coming from almost a year and a half in Baghdad. I did the January elections in Iraq where that didn't -- that level of violence didn't stop those people voting. And there's nowhere near the same challenge here.

Secondly, this is now the second election; it's not the first. The security forces, both U.S. coalitions -- what we call everybody else that's working with us that isn't in NATO -- and the NATO ISAF forces are all practiced and they're larger than they were before. The Afghan military and police have also gone through this once before at the time of the presidential election and they are larger and better trained than they were before. And the combination of all this is such that I totally believe this election is going to happen and I believe the excitement level of the Afghans is very high and that there will be a very large participation.

I am not -- I say again, I am not -- saying there won't be violence. It will not stop anything. And, you know, compared to people shooting candidates in the street in Baghdad, we have had four people -- four candidates I believe have been assassinated so far, if I -- don't absolutely hold me to that figure. I could be off by one. And there have been a few election workers killed. Some of it probably tribal (inaudible). Some of it may be between candidates or tribes, some of it is probably Taliban, but it's fairly small with something like -- I'm trying to remember the exact figure, but something like 6,000 candidates out there, so put it in perspective.

If you take security -- sorry, I'm giving you kind of a longer answer than you probably wanted. But if you take security at the level of, "Does this mean the country is secure?" No. There is a threat from sort of Taliban remnants of al-Qaida. There are a lot of armed groups. But it's a different picture in different parts of the country and that picture is reflected to some extent in the military deployments.

So I think the overall security mission in Afghanistan, which in many ways is providing a security shield until you build -- we in the international community -- both build Afghan security forces but really build a stable government is still a long-term one. Sorry to make such a long answer.

QUESTION: Ambassador, Parameswaran from Agence France Presse. Can you give us, please, a perspective on the number of troops -- foreign coalition groups on the ground and anticipation of an increase ahead of the election?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: You were breaking up just a little. I think you were asking me the number of coalition troops on the ground and --

QUESTION: And the --

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: And the anticipated increase. I'm not sitting on the exact figure and I would rather defer to the Pentagon, but it is somewhere in the 18- to 20,000 neighborhood. But I can have Lou [Finton] get the exact figure and e-mail it back to you all within the next couple of hours.

MR. SCENSNY: Yes, send it to me and I'll get it to him. This is Len.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Okay.

QUESTION: Ambassador, it's Charlie Wolfson from CBS News. Could you address the current situation with drugs and where we are in that? I don't know if there's any impact on the election vis-à-vis this issue, but obviously, if there is, I'd like to know that, too.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Sure. Where we are on drugs. Major problems. Major producer of opium. No question about that. Last year we did not have the results we wanted in either our own programs or the Afghans'. We have just looked at the figures that came out from the UN a couple of days ago. Basically, what -- first of all, let me do figures, then let me do -- sort of step back and say what do they represent.

The figures themselves show a 21 percent drop in land area being cultivated (inaudible) opium poppy, about a 2 percent drop in the production. The reason for that is simply that God smiled on Afghanistan last year. Crop conditions were good. It rained. There were no major blights and so there's a lot more wheat, there's a lot more melons and, unfortunately, there's a lot more poppy growing in the same field that it grew in before. But the land area, which is where we focus on how many hectares are growing this stuff, that went down.

Now it went down by a combination of tactics: President Karzai working the issue, some governors being very active. That is a tactic that appears to show promise but we are not relying on that as a sole means of addressing the problem. That would be wholly unrealistic. The current strategy relies on a combination of elements, both public awareness -- that is public awareness both that it's illegal and wrong, that the government wants them to stop, that people make get eradicated if they -- crops may get eradicated if they do it, what its effects are, all that public awareness campaign; an effort by the government to move people back; an effort to build Afghan judicial systems, which is making some progress but is slow; an effort to build the eradication forces and to build interdiction arrest forces that will go out and target traffickers; and an ability to build an eradication force. And obviously, eradication has a role and an important role both as threat in getting people not to cultivate and in the reality.

I don't think any -- all of that it to say I think we have a significantly retooled approach which we think will give some good results. We will have to prove that in the field. And this is such a big problem that it's going to go on for quite a while.

I do not see a big connection between the drug problem and the election in terms of having an effect on the election. There will be major issues that I think will come to the parliament after the election which will involve, you know, how the government works with this issue and how we'd work with it, but I don't see it having a direct cross-reference with people going to the polls and voting.

QUESTION: Sue Fleming from Reuters. In your opinion, do you think the elections are going to be free and fair, and are there enough election monitors to ensure that? And thirdly, in terms of the distribution of ballots, last time horses were used, private security contractors took out ballot boxes and things to people in remote areas. What are the

plans this time to get ballot boxes out to really remote areas so that the majority of people are able to vote?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Okay, several different pieces to that and I might have lost a little piece of the question, so if I drop something come back and tell me.

QUESTION: Sure.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: First of all, on monitors. Where we are right now, the joint electoral management body has accredited 2,200 independent observers. There are also more than 30,000 political party and candidate agents to watch (inaudible) the polls. I was over at the National Democratic Institute's Training Center today with people, mostly political agents. It's actually -- I mean, I know, you know, between diplomats and journalists we're all pretty jaundiced, but it's actually kind of inspiring because they're not getting paid and some of them have come a long way to go through these one-day training courses and they're (inaudible) and they're training a lot of people. We think that that will help both lower the temperature and increase the quality of the election.

I know ballot boxes are going out to some pretty remote places, although I don't have specifics for you on that.

By the way, I dropped on international observers. So far, there are 197 international observers that have been accredited from various organizations -- European Union, Asia Network for Free Elections, Human Rights Watch and so on. There's a whole list if you - - there's a press release from the Joint Electoral Management Body, which is a mixed Afghan and international body, and Lou [Finton] can get that to you if you want it.

So there are going to be a lot of people looking -- it's a very rugged country. You know, I talked to one of the people on our PRTs the other day who had done a ten-day swing to get to all parts of one -- all district headquarters of one province. And I do not know if ballot boxes are going everywhere but I know some of them are coming back out by mule back, so I think that sounds like they're pretty remote.

Will it be -- I think it will be a better election than the presidential election. I think it will be pretty good. I think at the end of the day, what really is going to count is whether Afghans believe that the result is substantially credible. And I think we're doing everything we can to make that happen. The various NGOs and the election bodies that are involved in this are doing everything they can to make it happen. I know that both the coalition and ISAF forces as well as the Afghans have put a lot of work into how they secure the ballot boxes, to move them from the polling stations to the counting stations. I'd like to talk more about that in a second. I'm sure something will go wrong someplace. But at the end of the day, I'm going to defer to the, you know, broadly based international observers and the domestic observers and the Afghans themselves and their opinions, the ones that are really going to count.

One thing that is, I think, an interesting developing just to note and that is the decision was made by the -- this JEMB, the Joint Electoral Management Body, to have the vote counting done at a -- it's not fully provincial level, but it's one at the district level, I think -- rather than the polling places. And there are some risks in that standard way you would count in a polling place when everybody's right there. The problem is that with many armed groups still in the country, pressure on people, on how they vote, is often applied on a community basis, rather than individual. So if you're counting in a polling place in a village or a small community, it's obvious how people have voted and it puts them under a lot more pressure.

By moving the ballot boxes to the district level, you remove that tool from a lot of groups in the countryside. Doing it that way gives you a higher level of problem with securing the ballot boxes, moving them and a counting process that's going to look like the colonial United States waiting days and even some weeks for all the ballot results to come in, but that's the price you pay for trying to do that that way.

QUESTION: Sorry. I just wondered whether you could answer the question, as well, on private security contractors and how many have been employed to -- foreign security contractors to (inaudible).

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Oh, I'm sorry. Yeah, I don't know -- let me just tell Lou what the question is because he may have to help get the answer.

(Speaking to Lou) Private security contractors' numbers employed to secure the election.

I know that there is a large company, Kroll, which is working with the JEMB validating the security procedures, but I don't know if there are others. And I'm going to pass that to Lou. I don't know if we even have that information at our fingertips. JEMB may have it and we'll get you what we have.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

QUESTION: Ambassador Neumann, it's Teri Schultz with Fox News Channel. Can you talk about whether there is any sense of support for Taliban political views or -- you know, they've been bragging about making a comeback. Is that going to happen at all in any area? When you talk about pressure at a community level, where is that coming from?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Yeah, it's a very good question. Now, do I have a really good answer on how strong the Taliban is? What makes this question so hard is that you have overlaps between Taliban as an ideological force, tribes, groups, tribes that are split along the border in a society where you get blood debts when you kill somebody in another tribe.

I think the Taliban is still pretty weak, first of all, and they have -- you know, when you look at what they are able to do in the country and you compare that to what a full-blown

insurgency looks like in some other places that we all know, this doesn't look like one. And I think there's a lot of exaggeration. But there is still a military capability. There is still some capability in Hikmatyar's organization, which has overlapped with and cooperated with the Taliban but is not the same. There are still a lot of armed groups in this country, some of whom get fractious. And all of that leaves you with a level of violence. But I don't personally see that we have a sort of resurgent Taliban surging back into the country, posing a major military challenge.

Having said that, I also don't think that we are in some kind of mopping-up operation or whatever words people would want to use. I do not see that we are at an early end to a level of violence that threatens governance in Afghanistan. I think that is a long-term problem because of the nature of the country and its disorganization and fragmentation after 25 years of warfare. But I wouldn't exaggerate either the ideological cohesion or the military threat of the Taliban anytime soon.

I don't know if that's a very good answer.

QUESTION: But are these --

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Yeah. Go ahead with a follow-up, if I haven't dealt with this.

QUESTION: Are people of Taliban-like views the ones who are pressuring people in the provinces, though, at the voting stations or do you expect they will be?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I'm sorry, you're breaking up just a little. I heard you say, am I worried about people in the Taliban threatening or pressuring people in the provinces.

QUESTION: Right. Who is --

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Did I get the question?

QUESTION: Who is pressuring people in the voting process?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Oh, you've got -- you know, there are estimations that you have 1,800 illegal armed militias still in this country. So the number of candidates for pressure on people -- and there are 6,000 candidates running in this election, many of whom still have weapons in one form or another. So the number of potential folk who can be pressuring other folks is almost legion and I wouldn't by any means, you know, equate that problem with Taliban alone. I think there is -- there are some areas of the country in which it is probably a Taliban problem, but it's not wholly.

I do not -- there are two kinds of pressure. There's pressure not to participate, which seems to me to be pretty trivial. There may be pressure on people to vote for particular candidates, which in any given locality can be a problem. I do not think either kind of

pressure will keep people away from the ballot boxes and I think you will see a turnout on election day that will be very significant.

One evidence of that, by the way, is that registrations in almost every province in Afghanistan have exceeded the international projections for what they would be, based on the presidential election.

QUESTION: Interesting. Thank you.

QUESTION: Ambassador, Charlie Wolfson again, with CBS. As long as we have you, so to speak, can you bring us -- can you give us an update on the ongoing search for Mr. bin Laden?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I wouldn't touch that with a barge pole. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

QUESTION: Can I ask another? Is anyone else in line? Libby?

QUESTION: Ambassador Neumann --

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I'm still good for a couple of minutes. You're breaking up a little bit. Go ahead.

QUESTION: It's Libby Leist at NBC again. I'm wondering if you can characterize your own involvement and how much, you know, the U.S. has been involved in this election process and sort of what you do on a day-to-day basis and, you know, getting involved in helping organize this.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Yeah. Let me make -- again, we were having a little bit of breakup on the line. Let me make sure I got the question. You asked me what is my involvement -- our involvement -- in the election process on a day-to-day level. Did I get that right?

QUESTION: Right. Just characterize how involved the U.S. is in this effort.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: We are enormously involved in the election effort, without ever forgetting that at the end of the day this is an Afghan process. We are the strongest supporter, but we don't dominate it. And we play this role in a variety of different ways. Maybe if I just list them it will help.

One is that there is an international group that involves us, several other embassies, countries and the United Nations in the support of this. And I meet regularly with other ambassadors, with the Secretary General's Special Representative, by ourselves and with senior Afghan officials, with the Secretariat -- head of the Secretariat to the (inaudible) Afghan official, and with the election commission to deal with a variety of issues.

Second level is our involvement in funding. So far the United States has put \$40 million into this election, and we are wanting the international community to close a funding gap that still remains. I don't think it's going to threaten the process and it's not an exclusively U.S. role, but both from here -- this Embassy meeting with the other embassies, and in a Washington-led effort of political approaches in capitals -- we have been pushing to find additional money as some of the costs have gone up. I mean, they went up from projections. They're not like through the roof but they're -- if you really want to know, I can submerge you in the details of why the costs went up. But the fact is they did and we're out hunting for extra money.

We are involved in the preparations for the and that involves a great deal of work by the U.S. military, led by Lieutenant General Eikenberry, who is the commander of the coalition forces, and it involves a lot of work by NATO ISAF. On a personal level, I confer regularly with General Eikenberry about this. But this is, you know, it's not a thing that commanders do by themselves. There are a lot of people involved in that. My defense attaché's office is also a source of reporting. I have a political-military officer, and General Eikenberry and I have a very close working relationship to keep these things under review.

So all of these different pieces are sort of churning out there. And on any given day, you know, it might be a question of meeting with an ambassador, it might be a question of meeting with the international community. I have a very active staff that is -- you know, I think it's a mistake to personalize this too much. I've got people who are involved both in AID, people who work for the Embassy that are meeting every day and in telephone and e-mail contact across the board with the international staff, finding out what's going on, finding out what help they need, making sure we understand the status of funding, the status of international engagement, all of these things. So it's a real team effort.

QUESTION: Ambassador, Parameswaran again from Agence France Presse. We gather from news reports that hundreds of thousands, if not millions of refugees (inaudible) released from Pakistan and Iran will be returning to Afghanistan right before the elections. Will there be any implications in terms of security or any other problems?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Let me just restate again to make sure I'm hearing the question. The question was that you are getting reports that hundreds of thousands of refugees will be returning from Pakistan and Iran, and will that have a destabilizing effect on the election? Did I get the question right?

QUESTION: That's right.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Okay. First of all, the reports are enormously exaggerated. We anticipate there will be some refugees returning over the period of the next several weeks and couple of months. I do not anticipate that those numbers will be anything like the kind of numbers that are being thrown around -- 30-, 40-, 50,000 maybe -- maybe more.

We are working closely with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which is involved in consultations both with the Pakistan Government and with the Afghan Ministry of Refugees. There is a planning process. Right now, I believe we have had -- my understanding is we've had -- I think this is just Pakistan and I don't know about Iran and I'm not sure my figures are absolutely correct, but my understanding is we've had about 220,000 refugees return so far this year. UNHCR and the Afghan Ministry were planning for a total of about 400,000 in their current planning. And I believe that any number we get in the next month or two is going to be within the planning projections of both sides and that it will present no particular challenge to the election.

QUESTION: Sue Fleming again from Reuters. Do you have any comments or reaction to the latest kidnapping today, I believe, of a British -- I think it was a British engineer? There's been sort of a rash of kidnappings.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: There was an attack yesterday on a convoy. I know -- or it appears that one British citizen was kidnapped. We are following that very closely, but given that it's an ongoing military situation, I really have to defer any comment on that to both the military and the British Embassy. It's really in their court.

QUESTION: Do you think the risk of kidnapping, especially of Westerners, has increased over recent months? Do you think it's getting worse or do you think that you're getting a grip on it?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I think the (inaudible) has been here for some time. We had the (inaudible). The numbers of kidnappings don't seem to me to be all that threatening, given the nature of the country. I mean, first of all, look, I've been here a month. You've got to remember that I'm coming out of Baghdad, so the way I'm looking at this might be different.

Secondly, this is still an unstable place. You have crime as well as terrorism. It is also a fact that in a place like Afghanistan you live, in security terms, in something of a gray environment. If you take reasonable security precautions, you can probably live and work pretty safely. If you insist on being an idiot, you can suffer the consequences.

Now, as I look at the way people are working in this country, it's a heck of a lot easier to work than Iraq. I mentioned that I went over to the National Democratic Institute. I don't want to finger them as, you know, a target for tomorrow, but I've seen their operation in downtown Baghdad and I've seen the amount of security it takes to keep them safe here and functioning, and this is a difference that is almost indescribable its order of magnitude of how much better it is here.

QUESTION: But I just want to follow up. Just to be absolutely sure on this, you said if you insist on being an idiot. Are you implying that some of those people in the convoys were idiots?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: No. But I'm saying that there -- don't put words in my mouth. But I know foreigners who like to say things are safe; "I can just walk around." If people do that, then they can get in trouble. Now, there is still a level of risk; convoys get attacked. Convoys run over bombs and convoys get attacked by small arms fire. I'm not saying the place is safe, but I'm saying that most operations can be conducted with a reasonable level of safety.

But you asked me did I see kidnapping vastly -- I'm putting words in your mouth now -- but on a considerable increase and threatening the process. No. The rest of the answer is explaining why I don't.

QUESTION: Can I ask you a quick question about -- and this was an issue in the presidential elections -- meddling by neighbors, particularly Iran? I don't know how much support you're still seeing for people like Hikmatyar, the you know, rabble-rousers.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Within the limits of what I can talk about, there is some influence by outside parties. But I would say it does not appear to me to be overwhelming and it is also much harder. In the presidential campaign you had a fairly small field. Here you've got 6,000 people with a somewhat confusing ballot, so it's -- not only is it, I would say, a different order of magnitude, but it's also a much harder field in which anybody can organize pressure, including the candidates.

QUESTION: And what about relations with Pakistan, just overall, not just in the elections? You think they're going well? And Musharraf has been taking some measures inside his country to cut down on potential production of terrorist mentality. Do you see that as helpful and do you notice any impact?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: President Musharraf has definitely been making an active effort. There's unquestionably an active Pakistani effort to work on a number of security areas and I believe that there is some improvement in what we're seeing. Beyond that, I think I have to defer to my military colleagues to try to assess that, since they're the ones who bear the brunt of that.

QUESTION: And one last on that. Is the U.S. still interested in trying to get permission from the Pakistanis to go into border areas?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I would pass on that one and leave it to my intelligence and military colleagues to answer on how they would (inaudible).

QUESTION: That doesn't go through diplomatic channels at all?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: It might, but I wouldn't speculate on it.

QUESTION: Thanks.

MR. SCENSNY: Any more questions? Thank you, sir.

QUESTION: Thank you and good luck.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: If I've worn you out, I must have had a success. Okay.

MR. SCENSNY: Thanks very much, Ambassador.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Thank you all for participating.

QUESTION: When you come back to Washington, come and do it in person.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Well, you know, if I don't get enough punishment being here, I suppose I could do that. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Thank you, sir.

QUESTION: Thank you.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I hope some of you or your organizations will come out for the election.

QUESTION: Oh, we'd love it.

MR. SCENSNY: Thank you all for coming.

(end transcript)