



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Statement by U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan

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Opening Statement at Monthly Press Briefing

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I would like to open today's meeting by focusing on the courage that has been shown in recent days by the Afghan people.

I am, of course, speaking about the recent terrorist violence directed against election workers in Jalalabad and citizens carrying voter registration cards in Uruzgan. The incidents were barbaric, and we have the deepest sympathy for the victims and their families. Tragically, we should expect that terrorists and extremists to launch more such attacks in an effort to derail Afghanistan's historic elections.

Afghanistan's friends - the Coalition and the international community - will do all that we can to stop such violence and to hold the elections on schedule.

The friends of Afghanistan have the greatest respect for way the Afghan people have reacted to this violence. We have long known that Afghans are courageous in war. We are now seeing that the Afghans - average Afghan citizens - are also courageous in seeking political freedom and a voice in their future.

Afghans are on the frontlines of the battle for freedom in the world. Americans, who are partners in this struggle, have the deepest admiration for the defiance and determination of Afghans in the face of extremist violence. It is easy to see why. Let me read to you a quotation from Fauzia Mohammadi, one of the survivors of the Jalalabad bombing: "They attacked us, and some of us died, and some of us were injured. But we will go back. I will go ahead, if my government wants me to. I'm not scared."

At the same time, Afghans continue to register to vote at a rate of 100,000 per day. Total registration has reached 5.2 million. This shows violence will not deter Afghans in the pursuit of their freedom.

The recent killings are also revealing about enemy. Imagine the fact that these people are killing unarmed men, women, and children. Theirs is a vision of darkness and death. But the Afghan nation insists on rebirth.

According to reports, the gunmen involved in the killings in Uruzgan searched their victims for voter registration cards and denounced those who had them. The killers also claimed that elections were "un-Islamic." We should pause and reflect on that absurd statement. The truth is that the Islamic faith is fully consistent with democracy. There is nothing about a Muslim that makes him unable or unfit to vote to select his leaders and to shape the future of his family and his country. The ideology of the terrorists is an insult, personally to me a Muslim, and to Muslims in Afghanistan and around the world. On behalf of the American people, I want to say that we share the sorrow at the loss of your brave fellow citizens. However, we are also inspired by the fact that the Afghan nation wants to do the right thing - to leave behind forever the extremism and the backward, totalitarian rule of the past and to seize this opportunity to secure their own freedom and self-government.

Also, before I take your questions, I wanted to just highlight a few of the important developments during the last month: President Karzai had a very successful visit to the United States. We agreed to enter into discussions about forming a long-term partnership between our two countries and to focus additional assistance on the power and water sectors. Regarding the security sector, the number of trained ANA troops has reached 12,360 and the ranks of trained Afghan National Police have reached 17,000.

In Istanbul, NATO has agreed to expand its operations in northern Afghanistan. ISAF will operate PRTs whose operations will cover nine additional provinces. This is the first stage of additional NATO ISAF expansion. We have distributed a fact sheet that summarizes the progress in reconstruction during the past month.

Now, I welcome your questions.

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