



Media Availability in Afghanistan

Richard L. Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State

Association of Experts in the Fields of Migration and Development Cooperation (AGEF) Vocational Training Center
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08:30 AM

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: Good Morning. *Ramadan Kareem*. I am very excited to be here, to meet the Japanese Ambassador, Ambassador Okuda – I want to thank particularly the nation of Japan for their efforts here, the United Nations, of course the UK, Canada – and my nation is also part of this program.

The whole world just witnessed almost a miracle in the election of October 9th and for two or three days, the entire world was focused on Afghanistan. You can see in this DDR program and this reintegration program, part of the reason why the presidential election was so successful. As we move forward to the spring and parliamentary elections, the DDR program becomes even more important and this Afghan New Beginning Program becomes even more important. It is absolutely essential that the commanders themselves take part in this program and to encourage the fighters to also continue to take part and continue to enroll in this program so we can have a successful parliamentary election.

It takes a lot of courage to fight. But, I would say it takes even more courage to enroll in a program like this and to try to change your life, by almost 180 degrees. I would also like to acknowledge the staff and the trainers here, their professionalism and their dedication to this program. They have chosen through these actions, to live a life of significance, and I am in great admiration of them.

I would be glad to try to answer any questions if you would like to fire a few at me, please.

Sir.

QUESTION: Is the United States encouraging Mr. Karzai to exclude all militia leaders from its cabinet? (Inaudible.)

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: President Karzai will make his own decisions regarding his cabinet, and I am sure he will make decisions that will assure the greatest possible benefits for the people of Afghanistan. He will make the decisions on who should have what positions and for what reasons.

Of course, if President Karzai were to ask our advice, we have opinions, and we would be glad to give them to him. But, we will let him ask, he is the President of this nation and he's got the ultimate responsibility.

Question Any comments on the current hostage crisis we have in Afghanistan? One of the demands obviously is to release prisoners from Guantanamo Bay and Bagram (inaudible).

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: First of all, this nation of Afghanistan for more than two decades has had an awful lot of trouble. But this phenomenon of kidnapping is something - as I understand it - new to Afghanistan and completely contrary to the culture of this nation. First thing I'd say is, I pray for the safety of those who are held hostage but, having said that, it is the United States' view that negotiating with hostage takers, compromising with hostage takers, only encourages more.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) Do you have any connections to the kidnapers?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: As people's lives are at stake, I think I will refrain from answering those types of questions. These matters have to be handled very delicately.

QUESTION: Any change in U.S. policy given President Bush's second term?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: The question of Afghanistan in the United States is not one that is a political question. The entire nation of the United States supports what is going on in Afghanistan and will continue to do so. The only possible change that might occur in the next four years of George W. Bush is to accelerate even further our assistance and support for Afghanistan.

QUESTION: Would the United States be interested in a permanent military presence in Afghanistan?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: From the beginning, we have said that we desire no permanent military presence in the region. We have no need for it. We have right now, temporarily, a need to continue to prosecute al-Qaeda and the Taliban but at some point in time, the Afghan National Army will be strong enough and will be numerous enough to be able to take care of all the security responsibilities here. I can't predict when that will be, but we and others are training the Afghan National Army and police forces as rapidly as possible.

QUESTION: During your trip to Pakistan, (inaudible) any talk on the location of bin Laden and is there any particular reason to focus on one specific area?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I have no idea where Usama bin Laden is, as we all know there are many holes in which he can hide. I am confident, however, that sooner or later, we will find him. As I said in Pakistan, we will stick our head in the right hole and there he will be.

Press Officer: Last question.

QUESTION: The video was delivered to TV station in Pakistan. (Inaudible) Is there a belief that he is there and did Musharraf have any explanation for how it is possible that the tape was in Pakistan?

DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE: I certainly don't know if Usama bin Laden is in Pakistan or if he is in Afghanistan. I will note that that tape, to which you refer, was apparently delivered by somebody to the station, indicating to me that it could have just as well been delivered in Abu Dhabi, New Delhi or, for that matter, New York. So, I wouldn't assume that Usama bin Laden is necessarily in Pakistan.

If I may end where I began, I would like to thank the members of the press for your interest in this DDR project. I think to the extent that this is explained and advertised more broadly here in Afghanistan, more rapidly we can continue the DDR process, which is really the key, as I've said, to successful parliamentary elections in the spring. I particularly point this out to the commanders of the various factions - that they themselves should come take part in these programs as an example to their troops.

Thank you all very much.

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