



Special Briefing on Afghanistan Elections

Ronald E. Neumann, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan

Via Teleconference Call from Kabul, Afghanistan

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(10:05 a.m. EDT)

QUESTION: What impact does this election have on reducing the threat of terrorism, finding Usama bin Laden and getting U.S. troops out of Afghanistan, if any?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I think it does have an impact but I think the impact is -- I think the impact is powerful but slow. I think making Afghanistan into a stable state, with a government which is deeply rooted, is the only long-term solution in dealing with the problem of terrorism and the state that we had before with the Taliban. And I think this election is a very necessary step, but I would characterize this as a very important milestone on a long road not the end of a road.

QUESTION: What about U.S. troops?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I think it is related to U.S. troops but it's not a "be all and an end all." That's going to be a function of a mixture of the training of the Afghan army and the standing up of the police, the building of governance and justice. You know, it's going to be a long-term proposition and I think it's made a lot of progress. The fact that there was so little violence on election day is partly a function of how well the Afghan army and police did their job, but it's still also a function of the amount of combat that we undertook in some of the border areas before the election. It's all a function of outstanding efforts across the border as well. So it is definitely progress or we would not have had a quiet election. It's not the end of the story either.

QUESTION: I just want to make sure I understood -- you said, "It's going to be a long-term proposition." I wasn't quite sure what you meant by "it?" You mean the U.S. troops staying there?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I mean the standing up of fully capable security forces and with it the standing up of a stable state in Afghanistan is going to be both our long-term processes and state probably long than the standing of the army, but I think we're going to have to be here for a while.

QUESTION: What about NATO?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Well, two things, first of all, we're a part of NATO. So NATO coming in doesn't mean we go home. I mean, you know, we work real hard to be a part of NATO. Secondly, NATO brings a large number of countries even more deeply, more solidly into Afghanistan, sends an enormously important signal of the breadth of international commitment to NATO -- to Afghanistan. And it may, over time, allow us to play with troop levels, but it is not an automatic -- first of all, it's not automatic because a lot of our troops would fold in under NATO command.

Secondly, it is by no means, no way, a sort of hand it to NATO and run kind of strategy. It is an enlargement of the international commitment to Afghanistan.

QUESTION: Good morning, Ambassador. I wanted to ask about the operations of the elections in the provinces -- how those were carried out?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I'm sorry. I heard -- I was losing a couple words you said. You said you wanted to ask about something in the -- elections in the provinces --

QUESTION: The election -- I wanted to ask about the elections. How the elections went in the provinces and some of the rural areas of Afghanistan, Helmand and Paktia?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Basically they were quite throughout. I mean there was a smattering of little incidents spread across the country in no very coherent form, but there was no big push against the election. There was no large outbreak of violence. There were a couple of little incidents of candidates fighting with each other, which had to be calmed down. I heard of one incident -- I think I heard of it in Helmand, but I'm not actually positive, where somebody insisted -- some male insisted on entering the women's polling station and he and the ballot boxes were all thrown out and that they eventually retrieved the ballot boxes in the their sealed form from the street and restored order.

There were a couple of -- there was one French soldier that, we regret, who was killed and there were two or three Afghan policemen that were killed. But it was, you know, for a country of roughly 28 million and a fairly big place it was quiet in almost all the provinces -- in all the provinces, as far as I know. And there was nothing sort of large or province-wide.

QUESTION: The women voted separately?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: The women voted separately but in the same -- let me -- they vote separately. I mean it was different --

QUESTION: Yeah, because this is democracy you're building. So I'm interested in why, you know, Muslim -- especially -- it's a Muslim country, why women and men are separated exercising a civic right or a civic duty?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Well, first of all, you have to understand the layout of the -- I went to eight polling centers yesterday and each polling center has numerous polling rooms or stations in it. And in most of them there were polling stations in the same building or in the adjoining building for both men and women. Men and women come in, more or less through the same door in many places. The women have separate rooms, but they didn't have any problem with us coming to see them. I've talked to women election officials in maybe 20 different individual voting rooms. One of them was a principal in the school and she was telling me how good a job the police captain had done, who had been there before the election, helping secure the school.

They all seemed to be pretty satisfied with it. I think part of it is that women -- some Afghan women still wear this complete burqa and need to get it off them in order to deal with the ballot. And part of it is simply that's social convention here. But when you go from the fact that four years ago they were stoning women in a pit in the half-time in the soccer stadium to the women I saw all over this capital -- and they're all over the country running polling stations, women going in and voting, I think it's a pretty satisfactory level of advance.

QUESTION: What can you tell us about turnout?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I'm sorry, you said what can I tell you about the turnout, was that what you asked?

QUESTION: Yes, sir.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: We don't have final figures yet from the joint electoral monitoring group which ran the election. And it was very hard for me to judge about Kabul yesterday because they had -- oh, I don't know -- at least a third more polling stations than they did in the presidential election. Some of them seemed to be rather light; some of the others seemed to be heavy. And I think what -- the sense is that it was a good turnout but probably not as substantial as the presidential election, whether the fall off -- I don't think -- rather -- what do I want to say, not temporary but rather tangential knowledge we have so far (inaudible) out statistics, it does not look to me like the fall off was any less than you'd get in the fall off from a U.S. presidential election to U.S. bi-election on the out years.

There was certainly -- there was no political boycott of the election, nor was there any sense that people in any particular place were staying away from the elections because of fear. If the election numbers are down, that's going to take a little more complicated -- and I don't know that yet -- but if they are, it's going to take a little more complicated analysis than I am yet in a position to do to say what people are reacting to.

QUESTION: I'm wondering if you can talk about the international assistance during the election and also what do you expect the international assistance after this election?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I'm sorry. You said the international -- I just want to make sure that's -- you said the international assistance during the election?

QUESTION: Yes. And especially after -- after this election.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Okay. Are you talking -- I just want to make I'm answering your question. Are you talking about broad international aid assistance or are you talking about international assistance to the election?

QUESTION: I think I'm asking in general -- if you can talk about [that]. Thank you.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Okay, because that -- there's two separate things. One is the amount of international assistance in the election itself. That is considerable in financial terms. We ourselves, USAID, put over \$40 million into helping to get this election and a great many other countries contributed as well. There was also international presence in terms of being on the Joint Electoral Commission. And then there were international monitoring, probably close to 500 international monitor observers of one kind or another, (inaudible) the EU, the rest, but the election itself was run by Afghans. Over 80,000 party monitors were trained and they did a very good job of that.

I was very impressed as I walked around yesterday with how well the staffs and the monitors knew what they were doing in all the places that I visited. And the Afghans running and counting it. Security was basically handled by Afghan army and police. Our people were all -- international forces -- our forces were all on alert, all ready to react, but had to do very little. They were also standing by if any additional help is needed in moving the ballots to counting places.

More broadly on assistance, that's a big subject, there's an enormous amount of money. We're putting in -- this is a very poor country. It was a poor country before it was torn apart by 25 years of violence and it has no colonial transportation system backbone to build on it, as many other countries did in the post-colonial period. I think the needs are still enormous and there's some things like roads where there are roadblocks, if you will, or a block to security, to administration and governance, as well as to development of an economy. So I think that that need is going to continue for some time.

QUESTION: Well, what is the U.S. going to in -- do you have a post-election figure, roughly, in assistance?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Well, you know, at this point, there's an '06 budget that's up with Congress that could still change in conference. There's, you know, the '07 budget, but I can't put figures out for the future until their official Administration proposals on the table. And even though it's -- as you all know very well, are not the end of the word until Congress speaks.

QUESTION: What's the -- excuse me, but can you give the current request and save us a little time looking it up. The '06 budget.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I should know the '06 budget off the top of my head, but it's going through a couple of twists in Congress and I got out here a month and a half ago and I don't want to put a bad figure out on the table.

QUESTION: Okay.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I can ask our guys to get back and e-mail it back within the next half an hour or so.

QUESTION: Oh, sure. Thank you.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I'd rather give you the right figure than guess.

QUESTION: Sure.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, when you are able to break out the turnout figures, will it show turnout by sex? There have been some reports that women were intimidated and prevented from voting by intimidation.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I don't -- I'm looking at a couple of my colleagues here. Let me just ask. Okay, I'm told that the voting figures will show turnout by sex. I had to ask for some quick validation here from my able staff. I don't -- there may have been a couple of places where there was intimidation, but I am not aware of -- from the IRI report, the International Election Observers reports that I've seen so far have not said anything about intimidation. My -- and I talked to President Karzai tonight, his impression was that the women's turnout was high. And my guess is that it's going to be, you know, somewhere between 40 and 60 percent of the total. It will be -- a little below or little above half. I could be wrong, but my sense is that the turnout was quite high.

QUESTION: Those percentages based on, you mean, the population of registered women voters or just women?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Turnout as in percentage of those voters who voted.

QUESTION: Oh, okay.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: It is of the numbers of people who showed up and cast a ballot, my impression is that somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 percent, plus or minus and -- will turn out to have been women.

QUESTION: Is there a definable milestone ahead now to the next big step? I mean, I think of Iraq, you know, you have a constitution, you have a legislature. Is there something you could single out as the next goal to -- on the road to stability and should I say democracy? I don't know if I haven't heard that word.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: You know, I think there were several milestones, but they're not like the drafting of the constitution or the holding of the election.

QUESTION: Sure.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I think these are much more like you kind of grind through a set of processes. One is the parliament -- the parliament probably not going to be seated until close to December. I mean, it will be two or three weeks before all the ballots are counted and then they've got to go through a process of disputes and resolution and certify toward the end of October.

Once the parliament gets there, it's going to be a new group. It's going to be very diverse. It's not party organized. And so I would guess that you're going to go through a kind of bumpy ride as they learn how to be a parliament. But learning how to do it well and representing constituents is going to be a key part of this process of establishing a democracy.

Another part that's going to go on in parallel with that is going to be the seating of the provincial assemblies because they were also elected in this ballot. And this is the first time that you're going to have elected representatives in the parliament, because even in the Zahir Shah period, the village headmen were appointed by the government, they were not necessarily the tribal -- necessarily the tribal leaders. So the standing up of sort of a authentic elected authorities and the whole building of provincial level government that is both capable and honest is going to be a long, rough process, and I think that it's going to be really central to making sure that you have a government that's really a government of all of Afghanistan.

You have a popular president. There's no question Karzai's extremely popular. He's the one political figure who's -- his popularity cuts across all ethnic and political lines, but you've got to build on something that is larger and more institutionalized. And these are not going to be -- you know, I wish I could point to you, because it would make a lot easier answer, if I could just point you at, you know, sort of the next climactic thing. But basically having checked off all the climactic pieces that were laid out in Bonn, but the real issue now is that both the Afghans have to stick with the process of building an economy and a responsible government and we have to stick with helping hold it up until its supported and protected -- whatever term you want -- until it is firmly rooted and stable and it's a grinding, working process rather than kind of a climactic challenge. It makes lousy television.

QUESTION: So could you give any estimate, if you had to give an estimate, of number of years or -- what do you think we might --

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: No, I can't. It's, you know, it's just really hard. You're doing things that have never -- doing things that have never happened before, so there's no good basis on which to pull out estimates. I mean if three years ago you had to said to a lot of people that three years later you would have brought Afghans together, drafted a constitution, approved it, elected a president and had a second election -- National Assembly, people would have, you know, questioned exactly what substance you were imbibing. And the fact that those things have happened, I think shows that a lot is possible, but I don't know on what basis -- I mean, you know, it's sort of like trying to -- I don't want to use analogies. I do not know an analytical basis on which you can make an estimate of exactly how long this is going to take.

MODERATOR: Any further questions?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador -- on a busy day.

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Okay. You're most welcome. Well, it was a heck of a day yesterday and I think it was a great success. I hope others think that -- and I think pretty much all the international observers I talked to out here thought it was a big success.

QUESTION: Would your father have been impressed?

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: I think he would have. It's a long change from the days that he was here and I kind of wish he was still around to, you know, talk about this with.

QUESTION: Yes, all right, thank you.
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